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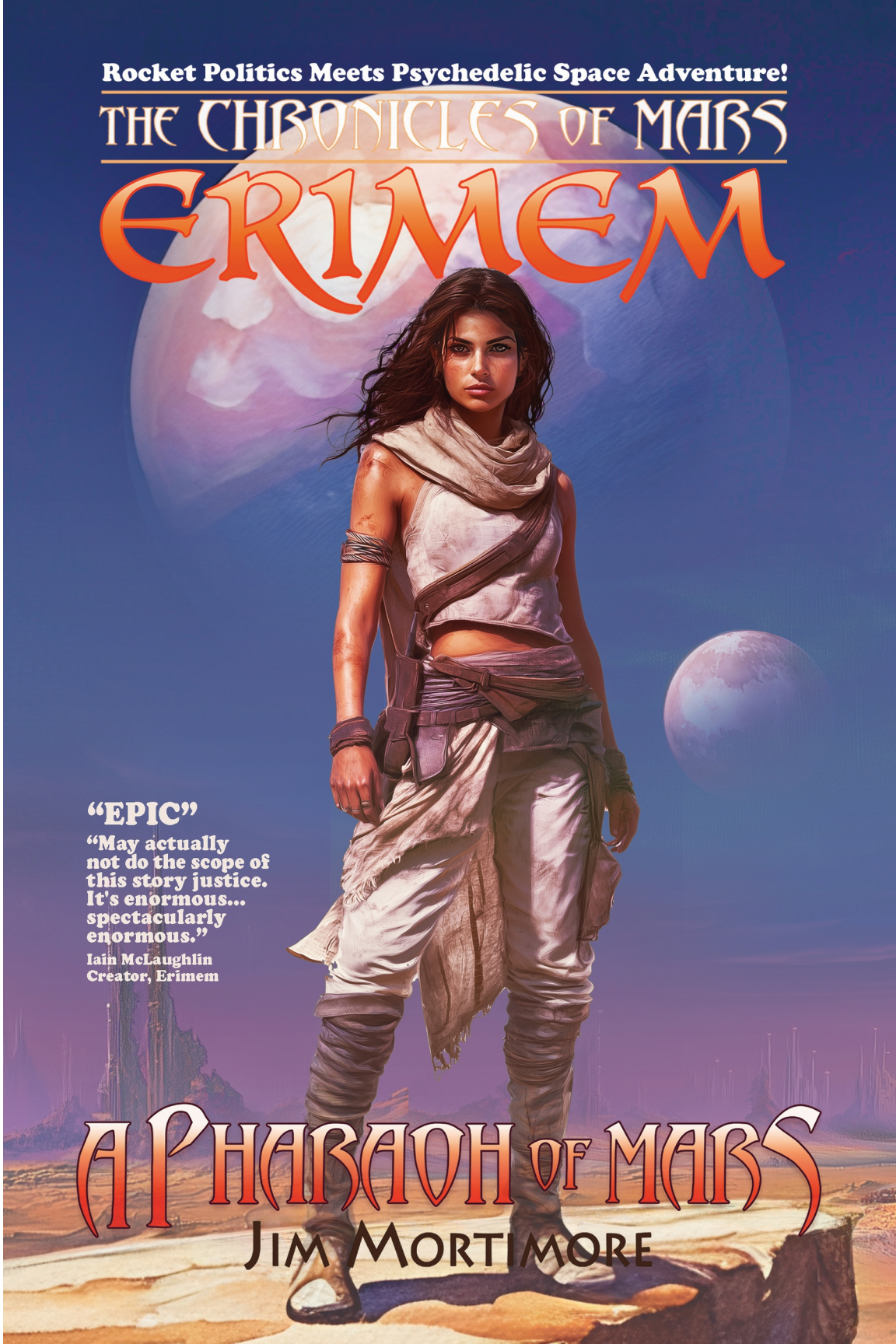
THE CHRONICLES OF MARS

# ERIMEM



"EPIC"

"May actually not do the scope of this story justice. It's enormous... spectacularly enormous."

Iain McLaughlin
Creator, Erimem

# A PHARAOH OF MARS

JIM MORTIMORE

**PROMOTIONAL VERSION**

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No Itsy Bitsy Maahosian Critturs Were Harmed
During The Making Of This Book.

A Goodly Few Fighting Men of Maahes, However, Were Most Memorably Mashed, Bashed, Smashed, Crashed and Violently Subdivided into Messy Segments.
(Sorry 'bout that.)

**ERIMEM**

# THE CHRONICLES OF MAAHES

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*Part One*

## A PHARAOH OF MAAHES

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***Being Adapted from an Unpublished Manuscript***
***Attributed to ERB and with Illustrations Attributed to HC***

***Transcribed and Arranged for Modern Vernacular by***
***Jim Mortimore***

***Art Jams by***
***Jane Elphinstone & Jim Mortimore***

## INTRODUCTION

I love the characters in the Erimem series.

I know that sounds like an arty-farty thing to say – and it probably is. It's also true. Erimem has lived in my head for quarter of a century now. I first created her back in 2000 when my hair was darker and I one had one chin. She is, in so many ways, very real to me in that I know her so well, know what she feels and how she thinks. She was once a living god, now… now she is a warrior, a thinker, at times she's a lost soul and at other she's the silly best friend who loves chips and likes cheesy disco music. I've had 25 years of her living in my brain so she feels like part of the family.

When I started building her life in 21st Century London, I built a group of people I have really come to like and whose company I relish. Well, mostly. A couple of them are less pleasant.

But I adore them all.

They all have their back-stories, they all have their histories and they've all had serious challenges. Now it's worth saying that I am the scoundrel behind a lot of their challenges but I love them anyway.

Erimem… a Pharaoh without a kingdom who found a home in 21st century London; Andy who gave up on her hopes for a higher education to take custody of her brother, Matt, after their parents died; Ibrahim who finds his life turned upside down when he finds that his 50-odd times great-aunt was a pharaoh and rocked up alive and well in the museum he created, and Helena, Ibrahim's other half who turns out to be considerably older than she lets on. Other characters have gathered around this main group. Some, like Andy's pirate-captain wife, Olivia, have stayed in the picture while others have found that time travel is a dangerous life and not for them.

And our travellers are going to find exactly how dangerous time travel can be in this new series *The Chronicles of Mars.*

Creative endeavours tend to be like living things. They rarely reach the audience in exactly the same form they first arrived in the creator's brain. For instance, my first novel started life as an idea for an audio script. But it changed. It evolved.

*A Pharaoh of Mars* started life as a novel in the run of Erimem novels and novellas published by Thebes Publishing. But time and circumstance made it evolve. The gestation period for this Chronicles of Mars series of books included the Covid era and some very serious ill-health that needed to be dealt

with. When the books began to gather speed again, it became clear that they had morphed into something larger, grander and more epic.

And believe me, they are epic.

I have taken my hands off of the project and it sits entirely in Jim's hands.

What can you expect from these books?

*Wonders.*

Absolute wonders.

You can expect incredibly rich and immersive world-building, starting with a shocking surprise which leads Erimem into a mystery that pulls her into an epic story on a distant planet. "Epic" may actually not do the scope of this story justice. It's enormous… spectacularly enormous. It's full of surprises, and I promise you that you have no idea where it's going. I am not going to spill the beans and spoil anything…

…But you are going to absolutely love the ride.

*Iain McLaughlin*
*June 2025*

*The Ride Starts Here*

# A Pharaoh of Mars

Jim Mortimore

"If Mars is indeed barren, what are we to say of the wonderfully life-like worlds of H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Odis Adelbert Kline and so many others. They are too real to be lost! They *must* exist somewhere!"

*The Alternative Martians*
*A. Bertram Chandler, Ace Books, 1965*

"Am I alive and a reality, or am I but a dream?"

*Edgar Rice Burroughs*

# ERIMEM
# A PHARAOH OF MAAHES

***CONTENTS***

*Excerpted from papers held by the estate of ERB (I)*


| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **PROLOGUE** | | | **THE ALTERNATIVE MAAHOSIANS** | 23 |


*Excerpted from papers held by the estate of ERB (II)*


| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **BOOK ONE** | | | **MARAUDERS OF MAAHES** | |
| 01 | Matt | I | Living in the Past | 37 |
| 02 | Andy | I | In the Tomb of the Pharaoh | 45 |
| 03 | Matt | II | A Journey in Other Worlds | 55 |
| 04 | Andy | II | Battle in the Sky | 67 |
| 05 | Matt | III | A City of Glass and Ghosts | 75 |
| 06 | Andy | III | Escape into Danger | 83 |
| **INTERLUDE** | | | **NOMADS OF MAAHES** | |
| 07 | ERB | I | My Sojourn in the Valley of the Kings | 105 |
| 08 | HC | I | Exiled from the Earthly Realm | 113 |
| **BOOK TWO** | | | **TRAITORS OF MAAHES** | |
| 09 | Andy | IV | The Black Flowers | 127 |
| 10 | Matt | IV | The Destiny of Men | 149 |
| 11 | Andy | V | The River of the Dead | 171 |
| 12 | Matt | V | An Apparition of Truth | 195 |
| 13 | Andy | VI | The Eve of the War | 219 |
| 14 | Matt | VI | Death Comes to Ferrohelios | 239 |


*Excerpted from papers held by the estate of ERB (III)*

**Excerpted from papers held by the estate of ERB (I)**

*My Dearest Emma,*

*My death and the life which followed, were these to be made public via any method other than fiction, and that of the most fantastic kind, would cause such outcry as to ruin forever the reputation of this humble chronicler of literary fancy; were that reputation not already so irreversibly stained by the blood and sand of worlds beyond ours that redemption from even the most noble and forgiving of men would assuredly be adjudged impossible to achieve.*

*Let me forestall any questions, and begin then, at the beginning, by relating a brief biopic which the passing of an entire lifetime has all but erased from memory, and which only now, on my return from my journey, is beginning also to return.*

*My name, which you know, but which I have questioned often over the impossible years of my extraordinarily long life, is Edgar Rice Burroughs, and I was born 36 years ago in Chicago on September 1st in the year 1875. In my time on this world I have been a ranch hand, a salesman, and an advertising copywriter; a trick rider, a crack shot and a buck private in the Seventh United States Cavalry, this being General Custer's old regiment, stationed at Fort Grant, Arizona Territory, where I chased Apaches but caught only dysentery. At no time did I travel further on this Earth than with my fellow countrymen and soldiers. Yet I have journeyed in other worlds much farther than this and, while I am a man history records as being of no more than 36 years, currently possess the experiences and memories of a man three times that age.*

*I write now to prepare you for my long–delayed return. Given the distance my words must travel and the manner of their journey it may be that this missive will never reach you, and yet I am compelled to relate the incredible sequence of events which it has been my privilege – perhaps even destiny – to experience.*

*Let me begin by allaying your fear that I have died alone and far from home. It is true my journey began alone but it has not continued so. Over time it has been my privilege to meet people from far different centuries and worlds, whose manner of speech and thought and life are in some cases so far removed from my own that knowledge of them calls to question the very nature of life itself, and yet come to know even the most outlandish of them as I do my own family, and even call them friends.*

*It is my hope to introduce to you in these pages a number of extraordinary adventurers, with whom I have shared so much adversity and tragedy, and to make you as familiar with them as I am, so that you many understand if, upon my return, there are moments, even days, when I seem to pine for some lost horizon which I can barely remember and you have never known.*

*It is with the most significant of these that my story must begin.*

*Let me begin this narrative, then, in its right and proper voice, this being that of the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem, Queen of Two Worlds, who was born to the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt more than 3500 years ago, but who most assuredly did not die there.*

*ERB*

*Letters from Tarzanea, Pub. 1950. (posthumously)*

# PROLOGUE
# THE ALTERNATIVE MAAHOSIANS

**From the Account of the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem**
**The Mirror of Heaven (I)**

Erimemushinteperem sat in the hushed twilight of her office on the second floor of the London Museum of History and Antiquities administered by her friend, employer and several thousand years distant relative Professor Ibrahim Hadmani, considering her future.

The office was infused with a dim warmth emitted by parchment–shaded uplighters, the furthest corners and furniture stained by umber shadows. The walls were lined with shelves, glass–fronted display cases. More shadows gathered behind the glass. Among them hid a wealth of antiquity: shaped wood, ceramic, glass and metal, pots, jars, tools; the merely–base rendered precious by time; rare glimpses of a greater history now long past recovery; their value, in some cases, incalculable. Much of this material dated back thousands of years. None matched their observer for age.

Resting on the hardwood desk blotter was an envelope. The postmark read: SLADE GREEN 2019. The return address read: CRYSTAL HEALTH GROUP. Erimem picked it up, pressed it to her forehead. The stiff, off–white paper was exactly room temperature. It felt cold and lifeless against her skin. Erimem considered the envelope. There was almost nothing of any noteworthiness about it. No scent, no texture, no hint of warp or weft, the waxed surface proof against any trace of oil from its sender's skin. The paper on which she had been taught to read and write had been made by craftsmen and artisans from pulped papyrus reeds which had grown from sun–ripened seeds along the banks of the Nile. Her paper had been a product of the world she ruled, and had connected her to it. Sun. Seed. Water. Knowledge. Divinity. In this world paper was made by machines, in some cases part *of* machines. *Kindle Fire. Paper White.*

This strange land, on whose shores she had become beached, had begun to replace slaves with machines centuries before her arrival yet it did not value *people* a fraction so well as the world she had left behind. To the world she had once ruled over a slave was a valued member of society; skilled, respected, honoured; and with equal chance of honor in the *duat* as any ruler, politician or priest. But not *here.* Not in this supposedly *enlightened* place. Here she had lost count of the places where people were valued less highly than the clothes they were forced to make, or the minerals they were forced to mine.

Life in the twenty first century had assured Erimem of one thing and one thing only: the future was not what it once was. As much as she embraced this world, as much as she honoured the friends she had made here, as much as time had showed her the gods her world valued so highly were gods of nothing but falsehood and betrayal; still she missed the past, her dry desert home, the pure sun and sky, the life that might have been. The absence of that world was a bitter taste in her mouth and a

void in her heart: sometimes less, sometimes more; always present. None more so than today. A past more distant than any fading memory, brought close enough to touch by the contents of the envelope she held.

Maybe.

Erimem stared at the envelope. Inside that slip of paper was her past – or her future. Her fate – or her destiny. Her life – or her death. She stared at the paper, noticing that now her fingers were trembling. How could she – who had commanded armies, ruled a world – be so badly frightened by a slip of paper?

'Penny for them?'

'Hello Ibrahim.' Erimem answered without looking up.

Ibrahim Hadmani took this as permission to enter the room. He lounged casually against the door frame.

'Quantum physicists would tell you with immense delight that the envelope you hold is simply one more example of Schrödinger's *Cat–In–The–Box* thought experiment. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle made manifest. An illustration of the problem of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics applied to everyday objects.'

Ibrahim waited for a response; Erimem remained silent.

'Put a cat in a box with a phial of poison triggered by a random subatomic event that may or may not occur. Close the lid – and *voila!* Is the cat alive or dead? Without opening the lid one can never know. Thus prior to observation the contents of the box are in a state of quantum superimposition, essentially meaningless – until you open it up and check out what's inside.'

Erimem put the envelope down on the table, and looked up. There was a strange sadness in her eyes, he noticed. Not that there wasn't always, slightly.

'Not meaningless for the cat.'

Ibrahim chuckled. 'You'll have no argument from me on that score.'

A moment passed.

Ibrahim nodded at the envelope. 'Are you going to open it?'

Erimem sighed. 'One of the most irksome things about teachers and friends, is that they persistently ask the hardest questions.'

*'One* of the things?' Ibrahim shook his head. 'I'm not doing my job right.' His chuckle became a laugh. 'Andy's downstairs. She wants to know if you're coming to fight club. She said she'd come up but the mood in your office has them sharpening knives from Westminster to Washington.'

Ibrahim waited but Erimem did not speak.

Ibrahim allowed one eyebrow to raise a fraction. 'I don't actually know what that means.' He sighed theatrically. *'Young* people.'

When Erimem did not respond, Ibrahim let the expression of sympathy fall from his face. 'If all else fails... I'm given to understand that bashing things can help.'

Erimem finally inclined her head, slow agreement.

She slid the envelope into her pocket.

'The cat can wait.'

'What's the first rule of fight club?'

*'Anyone who doesn't learn from history gets the crap bashed out of them!'*

The answer to Erimem's question was a chorus. Four voices. Two male, two female.

'And the second rule of fight club?'

*'Whoever gets the crap bashed out of them buys shots!'*

Erimem did not smile. 'Honoured students. Tonight I will drink high off the hog.'

'Eat.' This time there was only one voice. 'It's *eat* high off the hog.'

The correction was followed by a momentary but significant silence.

'Now you've done it,' someone muttered.

'Andy, my friend, I thank you for your wisdom.' Erimem smiled. It *looked* like a pleasant smile. 'Please step forward, so that I may demonstrate how one may defend oneself against an enemy possessing both superior wit and a freshly sharpened *khopesh.'*

Andy closed her eyes, offered a brief but fervent prayer to those gods whose job it was to watch over the stupidly voluble, tightened her grip on the wooden practice blade, and stepped forward onto the training mat.

Three seconds later she left the mat – without touching it.

She shook her head, gathered her wits and climbed painfully to her feet.

*Come back Krav, all is forgiven.*

Erimem studied the group before her. As well as Andy and Ibrahim there were Trina Burton and Tom Niven. Four products of a culture suffering the twin conceits of arrogance and laziness. Life was dangerous. Time travel more so. Erimem had already lost one new friend, a death she blamed on no–one more than herself. Her lack of understanding of this world had resulted in the removal from it of a life. The removal of that life had affected everyone around her far more than she thought it would. The passing of time only exacerbated the effect. Erimem valued her remaining friends highly and took her responsibilities towards them very seriously. Convincing them to undergo training in preparation for future travels had taken weeks of insistent persuasion. Convincing them to take the lessons seriously was turning out to be significantly harder work.

'What did Andy get wrong?'

Erimem waited out the small group's long silence.

'Anyone? Tom?'

Tom shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

'Ibrahim?'

They held her gaze, respectfully, she thought, but said nothing. *Here to learn,* their faces told her.

Erimem sighed. Life had been so much easier when she was a Pharaoh, when people simply did as they were told.

'She didn't win.' Erimem studied the group, holding each pair of eyes in turn, looking for a spark she could fan into a flame. 'Now I will teach you how to win.'

They waited. Their expectation was a palpable thickening of the air.

'When faced with violence, identify the nearest threat and *attack immediately.* Do

not hesitate. Do not employ reason. Do not attempt mediation. Simply *strike.* Punch the throat. Kick the knee. Moderate pressure in either of these places will disable an enemy immediately. The psychological advantage will be yours for the duration of combat.'

*There will never be a time when I cannot wield a weapon.*

*There will never be another Anna.*

'Now,' Erimem's gaze raked harshly across the faces before her. 'Who here, apart from Andy, believes they know how to throw a punch?'

When fight club was done for the night, Erimem turned to leave. Andy caught up to her in the campus car park.

'Hey you. Something on your mind? You were a meat grinder tonight. I may never have kids.'

Erimem hesitated. She was aware of Andy behind her, nearby, separated by something more than distance. Erimem visualised her friend's compact form inked in shadow cast by a sodium yellow light. A cool evening breeze, weighed down with the smells of the city, all the more chill for the sweat of training, connected them briefly. When she spoke, Erimem didn't turn.

'You will never have children if you die in combat.'

A long moment of hush indicated Andy was turning this over in her mind.

'Look, far be it from me to cast aspersions on your opinion concerning preparedness... but we're not Jedi and we can't walk through walls. Maybe you could, I dunno, lighten up a bit on the goat–staring and cloud–busting? No–one's actually at war here.'

The tension in Andy's voice triggered an immediate response. Erimem gathered herself as if for combat, every muscle was held under enormous tension, poised at the moment of snapping. Andy was not a threat, she knew that. But old habits died long and hard.

'Life is war.'

'But it's not, Erimem. You know that. Surely you've lived here long enough by now?'

Erimem turned, struggling to suppress the urge to attack. 'Have you forgotten Anna so quickly?' With a supreme effort, she managed to keep the viciousness she felt from her voice.

Andy's eyes burned in the long shadows crossing her face.

'You know I haven't. None of us have.'

'Then why do you not *listen?* Death is not a *joke* to be told in a *pub* over a *pint*. It is but a heartbeat away, always. You do not laugh at death.' A breath, long held and slowly released. 'Death is the one who laughs.'

Andy bit her lip. 'Leaving aside the accidental Pythonism... Erimem... have you... are you... I mean... you're still seeing that counsellor, right? What's his name – Aaron?'

Erimem took a single step out of the light. Dressed in shadows she stood motionless, trying to control her feelings.

'I have witnessed the passing of thousands; ordered many of those deaths myself.

Why should Anna's affect me so much more than any other? I do not know. But it does. My life changed when I came here. It *changed*. As water changes to ice in winter. I do not want my friends to suffer that change.' The tension in her jaw laid spikes behind her eyes. Laid them there, and *pushed.* 'In this regard I am utterly *helpless*.' Erimem spat the last words from thinned lips as if it were a curse.

Erimem watched her friend shuffle, suddenly uneasy, taking a half–step back as if aware she'd overstepped some invisible line. A lesson worth learning. It wasn't enough. These people had too much to *un*learn. Too much soft living, too much luxury, too much indulgence. Too many habits to break. As for Andy, her desire could not have been clearer: she wanted to move closer, demonstrate friendship, *hug*. That she did none of these things came as no surprise; Erimem was too far removed from her world–view; reality and reverie were strangers here, and always would be.

*Life is a desert, my friend, and death is a line in the sand between us.*

Erimem studied the younger woman, acutely aware of the way she must appear to her: an exotic stranger, distant but attractive in ways Andy could never have imagined... before they'd met.

'It's OK,' Andy's tone effortlessly confirmed Erimem's assessment. 'I'm here.'

Her words were a platitude, meaningless in any real terms. Short of laying down her life, how could someone of Andy's standing demonstrate friendship for a Pharaoh? Erimem sighed. She wasn't a Pharaoh any more. Not a ruler. Just a woman with a lifetime of memories of privilege. And Andy was a woman born into a world sufficiently alien that it routinely valued individuality more highly than royalty. How could she ever understand anything that passed between them?

The assessment was accurate. How could it be otherwise? Yet Erimem experienced a moment of surprise when her tension was alleviated slightly by Andy's words.

'We're all here. For you, for each other. Erimem. You're not alone anymore.'

Erimem considered. In her mind a line scribed itself, ruler straight, through endless dunes towards a far horizon. 'My friend, you are a treasury of human kindness.'

Andy flushed. 'Since you bring it up I suppose I am the font of all–'

'But your kindness cannot stand against history.'

Erimem's words, a flat wall, hard and cold.

'There is something you must see.'

The museum was shrouded in darkness when Andy pulled her battered, sand–coloured Jeep into one of the Staff Reserved parking slots beside the hottest, shiniest, most thumpingly stupid gas-guzzling land-yacht she'd ever seen. What were they paying security guards these days? Better rates than cafe managers, apparently.

She turned off the Jeep's engine and vaulted the driver's door (no amount of elbow grease or cursing had ever managed to unjam it) hoping that the oil stains from the dodgy block wouldn't make too much mess on the neatly swept tarmac. Erimem, exiting through the Jeep's only functioning door, was already waiting for her. She led the way around the side of the main building and through a security gate.

A single sodium light came on as they entered the loading dock. Otherwise the rear of the building was in darkness.

*Creepy, much?*

The creepiness only increased as they entered the building. This was the area where museum exhibits were kept while being catalogued, analysed or stored before being displayed to the public. It was home to a number of high–security lock–ups; hermetically sealed, humidity and temperature controlled, a bunch of offices, a strangely anachronistic library panelled in oak, and a relatively awe–inspiring lab filled with more computerised toys than any mad white–goods designer could ever hope to dream of. Andy had visited the library many times but the lab only once – it had both challenged and intimidated her. Now, passing the long glass observation windows at night, walking softly behind Erimem along darkened passages lit only by tiny ready lights on the security card readers on the many doors they passed, Andy felt that she'd been led along a forest–pathway of glimmering digital crumbs into some dark and secret world that routinely hid itself away from the light of day and sight of men.

*Dan Brown, eat your heart out.*

The thought was only amplified when Erimem swiped her card through the door reader at the end of the long passage, ushering Andy into a dark, vaulted space filled with restless shadows and shifting currents of cold air.

Sparing a moment to wish she'd taken the time to change out of her gym kit, Andy said, 'Hey do you have any lights in the–'

At that moment the lights came on. Andy jumped half out of her skin. She shook her head.

'Of course you do. Motion controlled, even.'

Erimem shot Andy a sideways glance. Curiosity? Humour? There were days – more often than not lately – when it was hard to tell just what her friend was thinking.

'There is nothing to fear.' Erimem's voice was as cold and flat as her words. 'Everything here is long dead.'

'My friend, you have been watching too many Hammer movies.' Erimem's glance needed no translation. 'What I mean is, that's what the hot chick always says before the Mummy leaps out of the shadows.'

Erimem's only reply was to lead Andy deeper into the maze of shelves and crates the lights had revealed. The lights tracked their movements, and Andy felt she was walking through a tiny oasis of light, in a vast desert of shadow.

Then Erimem stopped.

Facing them was a large crate. Erimem picked up a pry–bar from the top of the crate and levered the lid and sides off. The crash as the wooden panels fell to the floor was unnaturally loud after the silence, and the echoes of their falls swept the dark recesses of the room like distant thunder.

Andy stared, puzzled, into the open crate.

'Hang on – is that your–?'

'Sarcophagus, yes.' Erimem nodded, put down the pry–bar. 'Ibrahim had it moved here until we could analyse the discovery.'

'Discovery?'

'Resolve the mystery.'

'Discovery? Mystery?' Andy frowned. 'I thought the only mystery here was that your sarcophagus was dug up empty. And that's not even a mystery to us. I mean – we know what happened to you, don't we? You came here. To the twenty first century, I mean.'

Erimem chewed her lip. A deep crease formed in her forehead.

'I was seventeen when I left Egypt,' she said softly. 'I don't know how old I am now. There's a hole in my memory - and I don't even know how old *that* is.'

Andy turned this over in her mind. Cold drafts swirled at the edge of the light.

'What... Erimem... that's... You don't *know?'*

'I might *never* know.' Erimem reached into her pocket, pulled out an envelope.

'What's that?'

'It is my death. Or my life. I do not yet know which.' Erimem held the envelope to Andy. 'Like Schrödinger, I have been too frightened to look.'

Erimem waited. Andy suddenly realised she wanted her to take the envelope. Take it, open it...

Erimem nodded, as if divining Andy's thoughts.

With an abrupt intake of breath, Andy snatched the envelope and tore it open.

Inside was a letter. The header read: CRYSTAL HEALTH GROUP GENETRACE BIOLAB. Underneath it was a line in smaller italics: *Accredited DNA Testing.*

Enclosed with the letter were two sheets of thin plastic film, printed with a series of coloured blocks. One was labelled with Erimem's name. The other *Sample 002: Jane Doe.*

Andy's puzzlement deepened. 'What on earth are you doing with a DNA test?'

Erimem said nothing.

Andy held the two pieces of film up to the light and slid them across one another until the patterns of coloured blocks lined up.

'Well these are a perfect match, so unless you you're an identical twin or a pod person from *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* then these must both be from you. Right?'

Erimem nodded slowly. Then she shook her head. She looked at the sarcophagus. Following her gaze Andy could see from tool marks that the lid had been opened and closed again – recently by the look of it. Looking back at her friend, Andy saw Erimem's eyes were burning, feral points of light. Her face had acquired a stiff, waxy sheen. She took the envelope and films from Andy. 'The cat is dead, then.' Abruptly she crumpled both envelope and films and threw them away. They vanished into the shadows with a slippery sounding scrape and flutter.

Andy's frown deepened. The cold fist was back in her gut, clenching tight around her heart.

'I don't–'

'I am not a coward, Andy.'

'Well I know that but–'

With a sudden frenzy, Erimem picked up the pry–bar and levered the lid off her

sarcophagus. It fell to the ground with a vast, echoing crash.

'I have never run from anything or anyone, and *I will not run now.'*

Andy stared into the sarcophagus. It was not empty. In fact it was suddenly the farthest thing from empty she'd ever seen. Filling the space as if the one had been custom–built to fit the other, was... was...

Erimem leaned over the sarcophagus, reaching in, grabbing long strips of ancient *(skin it was desiccated human)* bandage, ripping them away from the mummified body, scattering priceless burial artifacts - including jewellery made from deep blue crystal and carvings of deities in the shape of human-animal hybrids such as the six-armed, sword wielding, lion-headed war god Maahes carrying a lotus-topped staff - among the crates and shadows.

*'Though it be my own death that finds me!'*

With these words Erimem's clutching fingers finally reached her prize. Only then did she stop, fists clenching and unclenching impotently, leaving shreds of torn bandage and skin to flutter, handfuls of desiccated insect wings to the floor, as Andy stared with cold horror at the vision her frenzied movements had brought to light.

The face within the sarcophagus, like the deathmask on its lid, was Erimem's.

**Excerpted from papers donated by the estate of ERB (II)**

*My Dearest Emma,*

*This narrative will be told by many voices, and you have heard only the first of them. There will be others in the following chapters, and I will preface them here with a necessary context.*

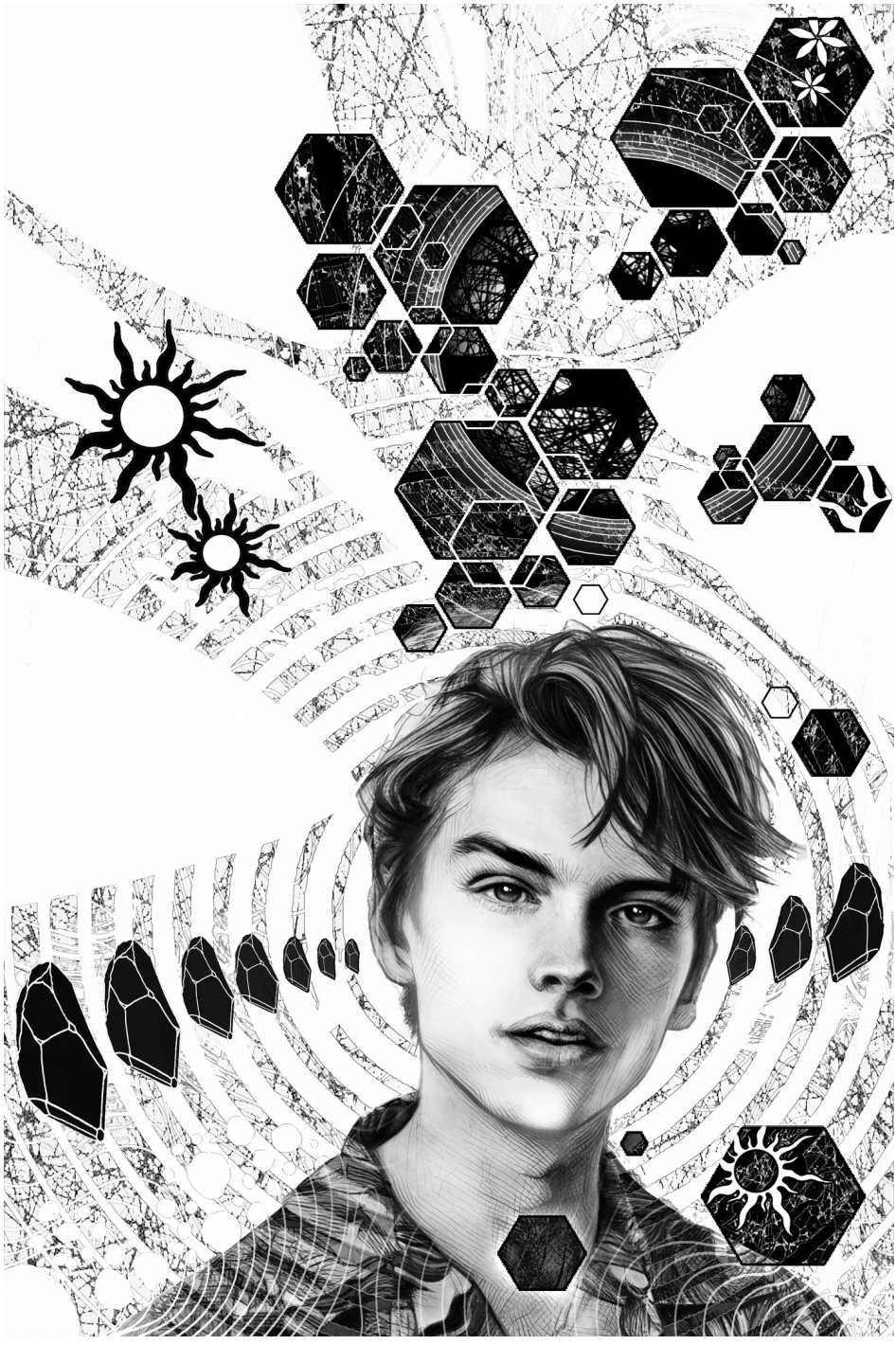
*And so it is with deep sadness that I must turn to the matter of my own involvement in the adventure. I say sadness for, as I am sure you remember, it begins with an argument between us concerning the quality of my health and the advisedness of my decision to travel in search of relief for what Confederate Army Doctors confirmed on the day I was given my medical discharge from service as nothing short of a biologically wayward heart.*

*Though my story begins with it I will not relate the sorry details of this argument, which you know so well, nor with the distressing nature of my parting with my beloved family, but instead with my belief that our lives together will be both far longer and far happier following my return, having obtained a cure for the condition which would otherwise without doubt call a premature halt to our happiness together due to my untimely death from heart failure.*

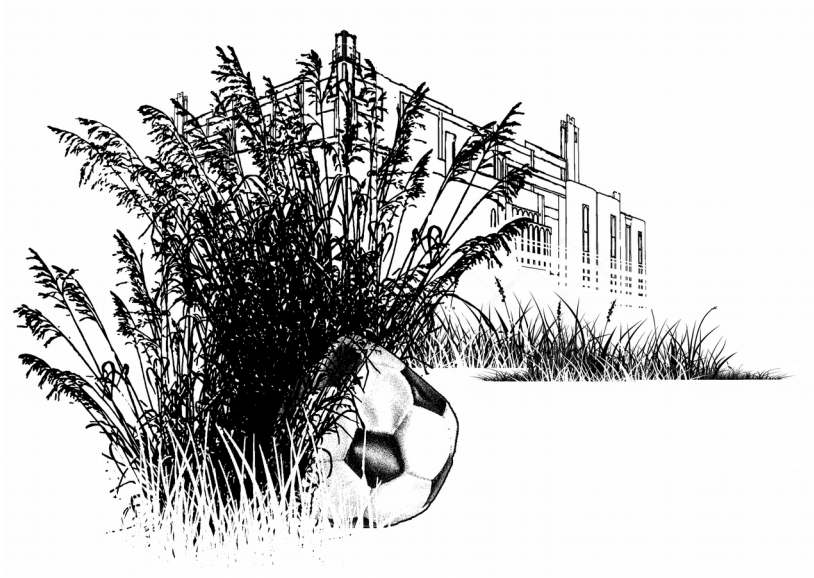
*Until then take solace in the beginning of my story, and that of my new found friends, Andrea, Matthew, Ibrahim and Erimem, and take it for what it is: proof that I still live, and remain utterly determined to return to you, whole and intact, as soon as humanly possible, despite every effort of the forces ranged against me by that self–styled and preternatural Queen of Two Worlds, the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem.*

*ERB*

*Letters from Tarzanea, Pub. 1950. (posthumously)*



# BOOK ONE
# MARAUDERS OF MAAHES



**From the Account of Matthew Hansen**
**I**
**Living in the Past**

*'You want to do something really stupid,'* she'd said, and of course he had.

Now Matt Hansen was beginning to think he'd fried the chips on every circuit board that a teenager, who (on an average day) wanted nothing more than to be *left–the–heck–alone–FYI,* could possibly have fried.

For a start here was this bling, burning a hole through his hand as if it had been polished with some kind of industrial–strength acid. And would it come off? Chance would be a fine thing. Super glue had *nada* on this particular piece of gollum. And then there was the fact that shiny sis and her loser-pod had just walked into a wall–sized flatscreen in a room way too big for the house it was part of, on the other side of which was apparently a cave or tomb or whatever in Egypt which, if the shinola he'd earwigged was on the level, only existed about, like, a hundred–and–*whatever* years ago, FYI.

Added to all of which was that the whole Beano strip was one hundred percent gospel.

At least, the cave was gospel, anyway – he knew that 'cos of smacking his head on the rocky roof as he stumbled forward through the wall–that–wasn't–a–wall, on the other side of which now lay the century he was born in, the world that still contained home and school and Mallory. Apparently there was electricity there. Electricity and network coverage and wifi hotspots – *there* but not *here.*

There were other things though. Wooden cases chock–full of museum–bling,

more than you could wave a shonky rainstick at. Sculptures of animals – cats, mostly; tall, thin, creepy looking cats sporting six legs (for some unfathomable reason) – lay scattered everywhere. And everything – *everything* – looked like it was papered with gold and pebble–dashed with gemstones. Well. He'd come in search of bling–paradise. Now he had more *gollum* than he could drag home in a Trashco delivery truck.

Shiny sis and the loser club had already mooched off along the tunnel. Since they had the only torches, the cave was now flooded with fast spreading shadows. The low grumble of voices drifted to him along the cold passage. Voices accompanying shiny sis's dulcet tones included her age–inappropriate curator buddy and the hot Moroccan chick she was always making moon–eyes at when she thought no–one was looking. Like, did she even realise it was the twenty first century? Who even *cared* anymore?

'… anyone even tell me *when* we...'

'… artifacts suggest an Eighteenth Dynasty tomb...'

'… and you can tell that from a six-legged Anubis statue...? '

'… Anpu actually... but still a bit on the strangely inexplicable side, I'll grant...'

'… and those glyphs? That's no Egyptian language I've ever seen...'

'… perhaps not from this year...'

'… sure, but then *what* year...? '

'… visualiser suggested 1911. As to what date it really is I don't have enough...'

Matt felt faint. A distant ringtone seemed to rattle around the bones of his skull, filling his ears. The image of a ringing telephone, the old–fashioned kind made of bakelite with a circular dial, rose in his mind. *Press ONE to accept this COLLECT CALL... from the TWILIGHT ZONE.*

Eighteenth Dynasty tomb?!

Nineteen–*eleven?!*

Then the phone was gone, replaced by a crushing sensation in his chest and an ice-cream ice–pick embedded between his eyes. He dragged in a deep breath and held it long enough to get dizzy, just to come down. The air was bone dry. It seemed to suck the moisture right out of his throat with every breath. It *burned.* The burn worked deeper into his chest with every breath.

He hesitated, looked back. Mallory would be waiting outside the house but the house itself – along with twenty first century in which it resided – appeared to have done a complete and utter runner, replaced apparently by a continuation of the stone passage, receding into darkness.

He turned – hands out because the passage was now pitch black – and smacked his head for a second time on a rocky ledge that that felt even sharper and harder than the first one.

*'Ow!'*

OK, stop.

Light. That's what he needed.

Where was he going to – oh, yeah. He dragged his 'droid out from his pocket and thumbed the torch button. A perfect circle of white light slid across the rocky walls.

Alright. Time to find shiny sis and quiz her as to what exactly was what around here.

He took three steps back along the passage – and fell over something that felt like a squashy bag of old vegetables. The phone skittered off into the darkness and the light went out. He swore again, groped around, finding himself crawling on hard, dusty rock between other similarly squashy items. Then his hands found the phone and the light came back on.

A face stared at him out of the darkness.

A face frozen into a silent scream, eyes bulging, mouth gaping, lips peeled back, broken yellow teeth way past dental salvation bared desperately to the bone dry air.

He jerked upright, too startled to swear. The phone beam flickered wildly across the black space. Now he did swear. Loud and long.

*The cave was full of bodies.*

Time travel; a cave full of corpses; a pair of stone–cold, dead–as–disco, Indiana Jones clones... and this on top of the cat, the ass–reaming from shiny sis, Mallory's wacky crack–house caper... the whole hash–tag–exclamation–point box of frogs.

All in all it was shaping up to be one seriously strange-ass day.

The day hadn't started out strange. It had started like every other day of his train–wreck life: in other words, with shiny sis booting him out of bed while delivering the wholly familiar and permanently unfunny promise that if he didn't de–stink his room she was going to call in exterminators; and, because this happened to be a Thursday and therefore a school day, if he didn't *move it* and *right quick* because she'd had enough of his *asshole shinola,* she was going to confiscate his door key and lock him out of the house, dressed or undressed she didn't care which, and he could just show up to class like *that.*

*Show up to class?*

Out of touch, much?

She'd made breakfast – cold of course 'cos she didn't even wait for him to shower – 'cos landing a job in a uni caff meant she naturally fancied herself some kind of genius or whatever, even though she never listened when he told her he was *mos def not* vegan, which just showed how much respect she really had, and thanks so much for the tasty tofu toasties, and Dr. Cow tree nut cheese and salad lunchbox, and, oh yeah, *nuts* you too, FYI.

She nabbed his keys alright, she managed *that* while he was in the shower, but he'd already skyped her eye–liner and he retrieved his keys from her room while she was washing up. He dressed in stony silence then slammed the back door on his way out hard enough to rattle the kitchen windows and all the little cactus pots lined up along the sills.

Half way to school he'd had enough of that direction, and changed it.

He tagged the local Toxico with a taster–spray polar bear, then mooched inside and snagged a pasty to cover skyping a bunch of other shit. Well, the shiny checkout chick clocked him but he flung some verbal her way and ran like a bastard, and the cameras in the Toxo had blind spots and, hey, Toxo were screwing with the Arctic

and polar bears and whatever, so screw them anyway, all the way to Global Warming Day. After which he pegged it round the corner and didn't stop running 'til he hit the canal, by which time he'd palmed off everything edible on some sparse–looking homeless types, after which he rolled a fat cone and took it for a drive; and that was how the day started, FYI, AFU; and all this because it wasn't enough that life was an epic slice of rancid ass–cake. It wasn't enough that school was the plate that cake was served up on. No. There was more. There was *always* more. If it wasn't the shiny bling–bangers in class getting all up in his face about some Tull torrent he happened to skype, it was shiny sis getting all religious on his ass.

*Do your homework, Matt. What's this letter from the headmaster, Matt? Getting high now Matt? Kicking cats in the canal now Matt? Can we just forget for a minute the fact that you seem utterly hell–bent on disrespecting the ghost of our dead mother? Can we just get past that already? Being your legal guardian comes with a certain set of responsibilities, you grok? And you can put that look back in your hip pocket as quick as you like. Get it out the day you're old enough and ugly enough to score a crash–pad of your own. In the meantime, one more bunk–off, one more Camberwell Carrot, one more moggie misadventure and I'll cancel your phone contract, pull the wifi and kick your bony teenage ass so far into the future you'll think you're Marty McFly. Now go to your room and don't talk to me until tomorrow! Oh yeah – and I want my make–up back!*

He hadn't gone to his room. He'd gone back to the canal – booting over the wheelie bin and following this up with somewhat less effective kicks at every cat *en–route* to Nowhere Central.

*Andy.*

She was so *funny.* She was so *shiny.*

Then again *she* didn't have to chase a cone just to choke down another day of her own rancid life. Her and the whole ass–cactus loser club. It was just a *cone*, man. Everyone did them. There were days when washer–dryers up and down the street marched double–time just to delete the suburban stink, so, two–faced hypocrisy, much?

Screw the shiny lot of them.

Feeling like he was coming home, Matt vaulted the chain link fence back onto the misshapen lump of waste–ground lathered in busted–ass half–bats and weather–rotted timber, snooking disconsolately through waist–high weeds to a relatively shit–free zone close to the greasy black water. He stuffed his buds in his ears, turned up his play–list hard enough to hurt and snagged one of three doobies tucked behind the lining of his glasses–case. He lounged among the familiar overgrown bricks while the sun mooched listlessly across the bleak London sky, ticking off yet another mind–numbing day in his oh–so–shiny life, smoking weed among the weeds, ha–ha, lacking even the urge to kick something off the tow–path into the greasy water, instead devoting his energy to stoking up a head of steam loud enough to blot out the world.

And slowly the world did get blotted. Slowly his heartbeat settled and the anger changed into bitterness and then sadness. And it all washed over him like a black

tide, like a storm filled day that would never end. And then he thought of mum, stuffed in a coffin, boxed up like a cereal give–away, like all the things she'd done and the life she'd had were *meaningless,* like she was just some collectible toy some ass–cactus had just *put away;* and he thought of the back of dad's busted-ass Escort as he drove it away, and the anger came back, and buddied up – *hey pop–tart long time no smell how's tricks ya greasy fart?* – and he began to wish another cat would happen along, just so he could kick the flea–bitten fur–bag into the greasy water and know there was something in the world hurting worse than he was.

He kicked back. Smoke filled up the space behind his eyes.

Strange shadows crept across the waste ground beside the canal.

A rocking chair, a punctured football and a dead bird lay along the towpath, half buried in knee high grass. A fitful wind explored piles of bricks scattered through the clumps of sticky-buds and other bushes. Black water slopped and gurgled, a funhouse mirror to broken walls and arched windows, a derelict warehouse, roof pushed aside by young trees, the whole laid bare to the weather for as long as Matt could remember. *Joy, Ren.*

Time crept by, smoke and shadows.

Matt didn't hear footsteps approaching but he saw the long, gangly shadow fall across the tow–path, the weeds, the black water that fed them. He didn't turn. He didn't care who it was. He didn't care what they saw or thought when they did see him.

The shadow stretched across his feet, cruised up his chest, stopped just as it blocked the sun from his eyes.

He sighed, somehow found the energy to stare up at the intruder.

'Whatever you're selling I don't need it.'

'Really?' The girl's voice was smooth as peppermint, cold as a snowman's heart. 'Cos it looks like you're all done, Dylan.'

Matt suddenly realised his cone had burned down low enough to singe his fingertips. He smoked up the last of the roach and when it burned down to the skin flicked the embers into the canal, almost surprised when the rancid water didn't immediately burst into flame. After which he let the air sigh out of his lungs, a sound carefully calculated to convey frustration, impatience, annoyance; in other words a hopefully terminal dose of prime grade cheesedoffedness.

'Wow,' the girl handled his wordless hauteur as if inoculated against such intemperance at birth. 'Put a downer on a girl's whole day, why don'cha?'

Matt squinted, unable to penetrate the girl's dramatic back–light. He sighed again and then, surrendering to the inevitable, levered himself into a less comfortable sitting position. By the time he'd managed this the girl had turned her back and was scraping lumps of dirt and bits of brick off the tow path into the canal, and he *still* couldn't see her face.

Her voice sounded familiar though. Smooth and cold and... he snapped his fingers.

'You're her, right? From the estate. You left school last year. The chick from Mallory Towers.'

'That sounds dangerously like an Enid Blyton joke.'

'Enid who, now?'

'Is the *right* answer.' The girl turned then, and with the kind of cosmic coincidence occurring rarely enough to be evidenced only by planet–killing asteroid collision, found a stray beam of sunlight poking through the clouds. Her face, like her voice, was smooth and cold and kind of pretty and, though the sunlight was listless bordering on pathetic, the two somehow made a strangely compelling pair.

'No, don't get up. Lording it over the plebs is the life I was born for.'

'Screw *you.'* Matt scrambled to his feet, yanking out his buds.

Boy and girl faced off, spent a long moment sizing each other up.

*You wish,* her face told him smugly; he had no idea what *his* face said by way of a reply.

Canal water gurgled and slopped, and stank.

Matt sniffed. 'Matt,' he said, after an appropriately disrespectful silence.

The girl shrugged. 'Skank a dooby?'

Matt shook his head. 'I'm out.'

'Figures.' The girl chewed her lip thoughtfully. 'What's on your buds?'

Matt stuffed the buds back in his pocket.

'It's Tull isn't it?'

Matt sighed. Here it came. Another half–bat to the head from another ass-cactus bling–bitch. He geared up to leave and cued up an exit-line.

'What? My parents were 80s kids who used the wonders of modern technology to inflict their favourite *kitsch-a-bilia-crapola* on their kids? Get stuffed. Tull are cool, plain and. They hooked up in '67 and didn't break up 'til '11. They were together *longer* than my parents. Yeah, so if you can't see the wood for the trees, you can just grab yourself a pair of Boots granny readers and-'

'Hey, don't have a cow, man. I'm just liking that it ain't Adele's latest comeback EP, that's all. But hey, you wanna take a stroll, be my guest. I'll check out the latest youtube concert with an audience of one.'

Matt frowned and stopped in mid stride. He half–turned back and, despite every effort, his face was a question mark.

The girl waved her smartphone with a cheeky grin. She jerked her thumb at the silhouette of a factory building on the other side of the canal. The words *HOVIS: HOME OF THE FAMILY LOAF* stained the old red brick, the ancient marketing mnemonic itself petrified by geological layers of sprayed tags.

'Can you say *wifi hotspot?'*

Matt shoved his hands in his pockets, wondering whether to stay as bunched–up as his fists or not. Then, the lure of free wifi simply too much to resist, he turned on his heel and reversed course.

They spent the next two hours scrunched up together on the tow–path, with one bud each. When the concert wound up, the girl said, 'What's with the whole standing–on–one–leg–to–play–the–flute bit?'

'Beats me.' Matt shook his head, then remembered to take out his bud. 'And I *like* them. What's your name anyway?'

'Mallory,' the girl told him. 'Because my dad thought it was a cool name and my mum was too much of a jerkoff to take him on about it. So yeah. I was named after the tower block I was born in. Or some fossilised kids book, take your pick. Laugh and your buds are in the canal.'

'Yeah, well, stand in line. In my world everyone's an asshole.'

'Don't have a conniption fit. I never said I had a monopoly.'

'Too right.' Matt thought this over. 'Mallory. It's kinda cool, actually.'

'It kinda is, actually.' The girl nodded. 'You're an ass though. What's that on your face anyway, eye–liner? Fetching.'

'Screw you.'

'Wha'cha do, rip off your kid sister?'

'Screw *you.'*

'You know it's got glitter in, right?'

Matt scraped his sleeve across his face.

Mallory watched him and chuckled. 'Don't be boring.' She pulled Matt's arm away from his face and smeared it clean herself with one tattoed thumb.

Matt found himself staring at her face. As smooth and cold and pretty as her voice.

Her eyes narrowed. 'What – I'm a woman so I have to wear make–up?'

'Screw you.'

She laughed. 'Gotta love a guy with a consistent conversational gambit.'

Matt frowned. He sighed. Finally he chuckled. She grinned right along with him.

And so they spent the death of the day beside the canal, skyping bandwidth and dissing talentless pop. When the sun was low enough to turn the water black as the factory silhouettes Mallory held her hand out for the tube of eye–liner and, when he handed it over, tossed it into the canal. When the tube didn't sink they scooped up bits of brick and bombed it until it did. For a long moment they watched the ripples spread and fade, intersecting rings of light in the black water, every one exactly the same and yet utterly different. Then the moment passed and the darkness claimed everything.

Now the hottest thing in Matt's day was the girl. He could feel the heat coming off her in waves, desert rocks in the black night.

She studied him, curiously. 'Being a guy, and sufficiently Rosetta–ed to speak Spanish, I imagine you're wondering what might happen next.'

'Screw,' he said. 'And also, you.'

They sat down again, back to back this time, and smoked up his last half–pack of Menthol Green.

'DuMauriers, huh?' Smooth. Cold. Pretty. 'They sponsored Canadian Women's Golf until 1999.'

'The year before I was born. Where'd you dig that nugget up?'

'I have an enquiring mind and an insatiable need for learning.'

'I *feel* the *need*...' he muttered.

'… the *need* for *weed!'* She joined in the punchline and they chuckled. 'I know where we can score some. Like, I mean, I have friends, you know? If you're up for it.'

'If I've got any bank, you mean?'

'Yeah, well, there's that.'

'Yeah, well,' he said.

The darkness grew thicker around them.

'These friends of yours... they got anything, y'know... else?'

'Other than weed?'

'Of course, other than weed.'

'I dunno. Maybe.'

'Man, that's *cash.'*

Matt felt the movement of air as Mallory shook her head. 'So how do we pay?'

'Wait up, I'm getting a thing.'

'Yeah? A thing?'

'My shiny sis. There's these guys she hangs with. Her pod. The loser club - please note the lower case - but... this one chick works in the museum. She's kinda hot. Turkish or Moroccan or whatever.'

'Then again...' Cold. Pretty. '... there are people out there who might align themselves to the notion that *chick*'s a tad on on the over-sixties side.' She hung back a moment before adding, 'Over-and-done-with, even, FYI.'

Matt, feeling like he had nothing to say, went right ahead and said it.

While he was busy with that a thought struck him. 'My sister uses it all the time.'

*Well - perhaps not* all *the time.*

Mallory hung in for a long moment, mulling coolly, then threw in the towel.

'So... what about this *hot Moroccan chick?'*

'She scored a renter with some guy that runs the uni and his missus, or whatever. Had a jello box–social last month. All sorts of prime gollum there. Museum–ey bling, y'know. I guess she was cleaning it or filing it or whatever.'

'Yeah? Worth much?'

'Ain't got a scooby.' Matt thought about shrugging but in the death couldn't be bothered. 'We could always skype some and find out.'

Black water slurped and stank, invisible in the dark.

After a bit she said, 'You know it's *kype* right?'

'Huh?'

'Not "skype." "kype." '

Matt sniffed. 'Whatever.'

She chuckled. Ice fell, tinkling.

'Gotta love a guy who writes his own urban dictionary.'

Matt closed his eyes and wished the world away - for all the good *that* ever did.

'Then again, if it's museum–ey bling it ought to be worth something, right? To your friends?'

High overhead sun–shot contrails scratched lines of static in the black sky.

'You wanna do something really stupid?' she said, grinning hugely.

And of course he did.

**From the Account of Andrea Hansen**
**I**
**In the Tomb of the Pharaoh**

There were days when life showed you the most amazing things. Today wasn't one of those days. In fact it was shaping up to be one of the worst days Andy Hansen had experienced in months.

As if Matt-the-brat wasn't enough to contend with, there'd been the beasting agony of fight club, followed by the lunacy of finding Erimem's impossible corpse and now, to top it all, the sheer insanity of being stuck in a hundred–year old Egyptian tomb with a bunch of seriously bad–ass walking–dead types, all glowy and trying to strangle them and stuff. Not that time travel wasn't the coolest thing ever, which of course it was, but still, it had its down sides, and the very least of them was that it was apt to get you killed in any one of a hundred disgusting or at the very least inconvenient ways. Being whisked off into time and space was all well and good but dead was very definitely dead, a condition not to be sought or envied.

Ask Anna.

The day hadn't *really* kicked off that badly, with only the never–minor issues of Matt's school–avoidance, gateway-drug abuse and cat torture to deal with. There were days when all she wanted was to time–travel back to a normal life with normal parents. Well – if she was honest that was pretty much every day she didn't manage to distract herself with work or house chores or the Dickensian stack of paperwork which accompanied legal guardianship of one's infinitely malcontent younger sibling

or, just to pull a random example from the ether, the herculanean task of figuring out out how to tell the aforementioned malcontent that their dad was actually dead and not just missing.

Very occasionally the said senseless sibling would demonstrate his good side and everything was rainbows – but the storm always seemed to blow back directly overhead. Time would sort things out of course, it always did; in the meantime there was the day–to–day job of dealing with the truly epic fallout from their vintage collectible set of matching deceased parents in a way that didn't actually involve chloroforming the darling muppet they'd left in her care, selling his entire body as a job–lot to science and absconding to Morocco on the proceeds for the extended holiday she undoubtedly deserved.

The conversation with Matt's head teacher had pretty much consisted of him warning her that if Matt didn't shape up he was going to be taken off the register. Naturally it *went without saying* this would have *meaningful implications* for her legal guardianship, so Andy gulped down a super–sized helping of pride and spent forty minutes muttering *yessir, nossir* and *I absolutely agree there's a very real issue to resolve here,* in as many different ways as she knew how. Which, as it turned out, wasn't nearly half as many as life apparently demanded.

And every time Matt-the-Barbarian flipped into mayhem–mode the emotional trash–o–gram jamming up her mental inbox was the same: blame the idiot for being one, blame dad for playing Superman with the InterCity Gatwick Express, blame mum for pushing up the daisies, blame the lot of them for forcing her to take a minimum–wage job instead of an education which might actually have resulted in a meaningful or even just a happy life, and *then*... take all of her precious rage and pain and self pity, and shove the whole lot in the round file, because the truth was none of it was *anyone's* fault. It was just life: the shit which, according to the late, great John Lennon, happened while you were busy making other plans.

Other plans. There was a laugh, right there. *Other plans* today had included actually arriving at work on time, not getting a ticking–off from museum management to match the one she'd got from Dingbat-Matt's head teacher, not having to work late to avoid getting her wages docked, not bookending the working day with two ridiculous rows with an idiot brother who seemed hell–bent on stopping her loving, respecting or even *liking* him, not getting the tar kicked out of her at Fight Club, and most assuredly not having to babysit a three–thousand five hundred year old one–time Pharaoh's existential angst to the point of time travelling back to 1911 and being attacked in a hitherto undiscovered royal tomb in the Valley of the Kings by what seemed like a football–crowd sized gang of lightning wielding zombies.

Time travelling was still a new thing for Andy but she was nothing if not a pragmatic pilgrim. When the first corpse leapt to its feet, crackling with bursts of intense electric–blue energy, she wasted no time in retreating. Andy's T–shirt slogan since meeting Erimem remained clear and inarguable:

**!RUN AWAY!**
***No Hero Survives Contact With The Enemy***

In the time it took Andy to reiterate this life–preserving axiom Erimem had shoved Ibrahim to the far wall of the chamber, torn a couple of jewel–encrusted ceremonial daggers from their mounts while he gazed in horror as a hundredweight of priceless Pharaonic bling crashed to the ground, and then had leaped like a demon into the fray.

Andy watched the Egyptian woman drive through the shuddering shadows and flashes of energy filling the chamber. She moved like time–lapse photography, a series of strobing still–frames which captured the bunching of muscle under her T–shirt, the distant expression of concentration masking her face. *Flash.* The two daggers, still sheathed, slammed into two shrieking faces. *Flashflash.* Leaving the jewelled sheaths buried in her victim's faces, Erimem withdrew the blades and hurled them at two more corpses.

*Flashflashflash.*

Somewhere someone was screaming. Andy felt rather than heard the sound, registering it as a peculiar vibration raising the hairs on her neck. She looked around but was unable to identify the screamer.

*Flash.*

Ibrahim, pressed back against the piles of treasure, face to disbelieving face with the most preposterous cliché of his life: the dead, raised to life, in an Egyptian tomb.

*Flashflash.*

Bulging eyes, and gaping mouths, filled with lightning.

*Flashflashflashflashflash.*

Light exploded into the chamber. Andy turned, realising in an instant which seemed to last forever that there were more figures crowding into the space. A *lot* more figures. Each one with grasping hands outstretched, muscles corded so tight they seemed on the verge of stripping themselves from the very flesh they had once supported, blue lightning flashing from clawed fingers and broken nails, gaping eyes, silently screaming mouths.

Then the brightest flash of all illuminated the last figure to enter the chamber, driven beneath the square stone lintel with a familiar curse and beset by the glowing horde of death.

*Matt.*

When Andy arrived at Ibrahim's, following the second and most spectacularly assworthy ruck–of–the–day with The-Dingbat-Perfect-Storm, the Curator's Land Rover was already parked in the cul–de–sac beside a low hedge bordering a modest kid's playground. A soft otherworldly humming sound from the garden wind harp rose and fell with an intermittent breeze, drifting across the roundabout, climbing frame and swings. As Andy vaulted the Jeep door, she saw there was a teenage tyre-kicker smoking on one of the swings, twisting the seat round and round to make thin smoke rings under the stars. Something about the girl spelled *trouble* in large spiky capitals. Too tall, too old. Andy sighed. But then again so what, actually? There were days when Andy herself wished she could temporarily abandon her life to take a wild ride on some age–inappropriate kiddie–park amusement.

Well, no, let's be honest, she wished it (or its equivalent) every day – for all the good it ever did.

Someone – *probably Erimem and I must get her to kick that habit* – had left the front door on the latch. Andy pushed it open and moved into a darkened hallway. Indistinct voices came to her from the far end. Andy found Erimem in the kitchen, huddled together with Ibrahim over a pot of Red Hibiscus Tisane. Their voices were quiet, intense. An active tablet and a sheaf of photographs lay on the table between them, along with two sheets Andy recognised from her visit to the museum store–room earlier that evening: the results – now somewhat crumpled – of the DNA test.

Erimem and Ibrahim looked up as Andy lounged against the open archway and knocked.

'You're late.'

'I plead dementedness due to idiot bro.'

'An excellent defense, and the jury finds you not guilty.'

'Jolly good. And for Pete's sake, Erimem, lock this fine upstanding gentleman's front door, will you? This is the middle of London, not the Royal Palace at Thebes. I could've been anyone.'

'You are not anyone. You are you. I recognise your smell and your footsteps.'

'Whatever,' Andy sighed, making a mental note to randomly rotate her deodorant. 'Anyway, I shut the front door.'

Ibrahim beckoned her over to the table. 'Tea?'

Andy sloshed her iso bottle from side to side by way of an answer.

'"Squincher Zero?"' Ibrahim studied the label with an expression usually reserved for indecipherable finds of dubious antiquity. 'It's all Latin to me.' He frowned. 'No scratch that. *Latin* I understand.'

'Beats *Staminade* hands down.' Andy shoved the bottle back into her jacket pocket. 'So – what have we got?'

'An impossible mummy, an impossible DNA test, and a headache the size of Nebraska.'

'Nebraska,' Andy dragged another chair up to the table and settled lightly on it.

'Well, Idaho anyway.'

'Not entirely sure there's much to choose between them.' Andy sifted through the photographs, which showed various angles and details of the mummy currently interred in Erimem's sarcophagus.

'And it's the same with the mummy.'

'The impossible mummy which appeared from no–where in a sealed sarcophagus.'

'Hence the headache.' Ibrahim nodded tiredly, slipped his reading glasses upwards and massaged the bridge of his nose. 'The mummy's appearance isn't the only impossible thing about it either.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Well, the burial objects contained with the wrappings – a lion-headed statue of the Egyptian war-god *Maahes* springs to mind for one – are far from standard for Dynastic Egypt. They're unique among artifacts previously found throughout tombs

from that period.'

'Unique how?'

'They're made from a translucent blue material which I thought at first was sapphire or faience glass of some kind. But something felt off about it. I had a geological analysis made on a sample and the results were incredible. The material isn't sintered quartz, nor ceramic of any kind. The lab is currently conducting recalibrating tests on their equipment because the results were – and I'm quoting the department manager here – "Not so much pottery as frankly potty."' Ibrahim gazed from face to face as if he himself barely believed what he was about to say. 'According to the test results the blue glass doesn't conform to any known terrestrial mineral of any kind.'

A hush fell over the room.

'You mean it's–?'

Ibrahim raised a finger, then thought better of the motion and adjusted his glasses. 'On the whole I think we probably shouldn't jump to conclusions.'

'But you said–'

'Yes, yes, quite, but, hold that thought for now because that's not all.' Without waiting for reactions he rushed on, 'The results of radio–carbon–dating tests carried out on extracts from both body and wrapping, suggest the mummy is older than it should be. Very nearly eight thousand years older, in fact.'

'Wait – that's impossible though, right?'

'It would certainly have Graham Hancock dancing like the cast of Glee if it were true.' Ibrahim pushed his chair back from the table and for a long moment paid serious attention to his Hibiscus Red. 'Probably it just means the test results were SNAFU and there was a problem with the lab equipment. I can double–check them, though I'll have to wiggle the budget a bit. It might take a while.'

'I do not have *a while*.' Until now Erimem had barely spoken. Her voice was dark, almost bleak. She sat at the head of the table, looking down at the photographs, and for the first time Andy noticed her hair was cut uncharacteristically short.

'Did you change your...?' Andy whirled her finger around her woolly Tibetan hat.

Erimem did not look up from the photographs as she reached out for Andy, snagged the tassels of the hat and snatched it away. 'Long hair is an advantage to an enemy.'

'Hey, you, that's hand knitted in Birmingham,' Andy snatched the hat back and stuffed it into her pocket. 'Why don't you have a while?'

Now Erimem did look up. 'How much do you know about quantum mechanics, friend Andy?'

'Er... the cat in the box? Is it alive or dead? That sort of thing?'

Erimem scowled. 'In my world men of learning had more respect for the servants of Bubastis. To poison a cat is a crime. The punishment is death by flaying.'

'And that's why "Schrodinger's Cat" is just a *thought experiment*.' Andy noticed Ibrahim was careful to conceal his smile. 'Didn't we cover this? It's not a *real* cat. It's a commonplace symbol by which we try to understand the concept of dual states.'

'It could have been a 'doodle.' Andy nodded agreement. 'Or a pony.'

Ibrahim thought this over.

'Although we might have needed a bigger box.'

'A cat once saved my life.' Erimem scowled, ignoring them both. 'There is nothing *commonplace* about a cat.'

Andy said, innocently, 'Who was it said, if you think you understand quantum mechanics, you don't understand quantum mechanics?'

'Richard Feynman, yes. Look this is all getting a bit off the beaten track. My point is this: Erimem has equipment which can let her travel through time and space. Like any traveller she can make changes wherever or whenever she goes. Maybe the mummy in the sarcophagus is the result of one of those changes. Maybe even one she hasn't made yet.'

'But... is it *her?'*

Ibrahim set down his tea cup. 'Some version of her, perhaps... the woman who lived the life – one life anyway – that Erimem did not. A life that led to her death, to that mummy in the sarcophagus. We'd need to ask a quantum physicist. Other than that, I couldn't honestly say.'

'Then how *do* we say? I mean, what does it mean, actually? That she's suddenly there, I mean. Is the universe going to explode or implode or, I don't know, something?'

'I suspect the universe has better things to do than cut off its nose to spite our faces.' Ibrahim finally gave in to the grin. 'No matter how preposterous the quantum mechanical provocation.' He poured more tea from the tall ceramic pot on the hotplate. 'But I can think of one obvious place to start.'

Erimem looked up from the DNA prints she was holding.

'Drink your tea, my friends. Tonight we witness my death.'

As the seething, crackling horde poured into the burial chamber, Andy didn't think – she acted, reaching behind her, finding the nearest hard, sharp object, grasping, swinging – *crunch* – one of the corpses fell away, face sheared half–off by the dagger–sharp elongated ears of a gold statue of the Egyptian Jackal-god Anpu. The corpse fell, dissolving into crackling light, thrashing and screeching and trying to get back to its feet, still trying to reach her.

As Matt fell backwards into the burial chamber, Andy swept the second of the matching pair of statues off its shelf and thrust it into Matt's wildly flailing hands.

'What am I supposed to do with *this?'* he cried frantically. 'And why has it got six legs?'

'The ears! The *ears!'* Andy demonstrated the lethal qualities of ancient ornamental metalwork by smashing her own dog statue as hard as she could into the face of the nearest glowing assailant. Blue lightning crackled and flashed. 'Forget the legs!'

'But–'

'Just *hit them, Matt!* We can get into what you're even doing here *later!'*

'My *life,* will you ever stop with the helicopter–mum routine?'

For a split second Andy froze, paralysed by sheer fury.

*Flash. Flashflash.*

Clawed hands reaching, seething energy, ice–blue lightning.

'How many times have I told you I am *not... your... MOTHER!'* Andy's voice rose in anger, her statue swinging in time with her words. Three figures reaching for Matt with clawed fingers fell away.

Matt gaped.

From the corner of her eye Andy saw Ibrahim levering himself up off the floor, groping for a weapon, grabbing a ceremonial spear, running two of the lightning–shot silhouettes through before jamming the spear sideways into the space between the wall and one ornamental column so the impaled figures, still thrashing, could not get free, then reaching wildy to prevent a shelf full of faience glass ceramic statues from falling to their doom on the slabbed chamber flooring. At the same time she began to realise that the tomb was not really full of assailants, it was just that the ones they despatched didn't actually *stay* despatched. Infused with blue lighting they simply scrambled to their feet or thrashed across the floor on all fours, continuing the attack. There seemed no way of stopping them and only one way of slowing them down. Even then the dismembered limbs kept thrashing and jerking, the clawed hands gasping in a horrifying emulation of life.

'Back to back!'

Andy wasn't about to argue with Erimem's strategic assessment. She grabbed Matt and jerked him back towards her friend's voice. Ibrahim worked his way back towards them, and soon they were fighting shoulder to shoulder.

*'Out! This way!'*

They moved.

Lightning flashed.

Shadows, black and impenetrable, jerked left and right in a stroboscopic nightmare.

Muscles burning from blow after blow. Skin burning with the touch of clawed fingers.

Backing through the tomb, chamber after chamber, stone walls and decorated columns.

The place was a maze. Where was the way out?

Then Erimem's shoulders were a wall at her back. Where were they?

Andy risked a quick glance around. They were back in the burial chamber. A familiar sarcophagus stood on an alabaster plinth in the centre of the room. Was it only minutes ago they'd been examining the artifact and calmly discussing the significance of its possible contents?

The burial chamber had only one entrance. That entrance was now full of lightning–shot silhouettes. Erimem swung them round to form a line facing their attackers.

'Are these the tomb robbers?' Ibrahim gasped.

'Tomb robbers? They were dead! I saw–'

'Shut *up* Matt!'

For once Matt did as he was told, backing away from the advancing figures –

which poured through the newly opened gap in the defensive line.

In moments the chamber was in chaos.

A figure leapt for her. Andy introduced his face to Anpu.

*Flash.*

A hand fell on her shoulder. A shout rose up in her throat but before it could emerge Erimem jerked her aside as the fallen corpse also rose up – and leaped towards her in a renewed frenzy. At some point Erimem had traded her ceremonial daggers for a pair of khopesh, curved Egyptian short–swords. Now she drove those blades into the corpse, rendering it into bloodless, lightning–shot chunks.

The flash of light as the corpse was torn apart drove Erimem to her knees with a heavy grunt of pain. In a second Andy realised why. The blades were gold, not real swords but jewelled art. Gold was conductive. Somehow the energy released as the corpse was despatched was conducted through the swords to Erimem herself, blasting her back into Andy with blue flame crackling around her hands and arms so that they both tumbled together into the corner of the chamber where Ibrahim was already huddled.

Andy gasped as the residual energy flashed from Erimem's body to her own and then earthed into the slabbed ground in a shower of sparks.

Cold light flashed.

Erimem was down. Ibrahim was down.

A dozen thrashing, crackling corpses filled the chamber.

*Matt! Where was–*

And then, with a flash like summer lightning, the sarcophagus erupted into scintillating life. Beams of blue energy poured into the chamber, engraving strange glyphs in the walls, jerking and rotating, driving the animated corpses to the ground in fuming wreckage. Recoiling from the light, Andy gaped when she saw the cause. Erimem had fallen back against the sarcophagus. Blue lightning was crawling along her arms and across her body. Her mouth gaped in a silent scream. Her eye sockets strobed like flashbulbs.

The world divided suddenly, everything and everyone Andy could see becoming lost in the blue light. She blinked rapidly but things just got worse. Were there *two* Erimems now? Older and younger? Superimposed one over the other like a *(test it was a DNA)* TV set tuned between channels?

Engulfed in lightning Erimem fell back into the open sarcophagus. Except it wasn't a sarcophagus anymore. It was an

infinitely receding tunnel made

*She*

entirely of starlight and

*tried*

resonating it was

*to*

light singing

*clear a*

blue

*path to the*

***!!FLASH!!***

A final concussion of light, so bright it felt cold, ice cold, tore through Andy's body.

*Matt–*

He was gone.

Everything was gone.

Blue lightning filled her head.

**From the Account of Matthew Hansen**
**II**
**A Journey In Other Worlds**

There was one thing you could say about life with little–to–no chance you'd be wrong: it *hurt.* It was a pain. In fact it was pure ass–cactus, properly distilled: a bargain–bucket blatancy of angst–basted truffle–butter. All of which paled into insignificance compared to the ice–blue agony upon which he was now transfixed.

No body. No mind. No thoughts. No feelings. No past. No future.

Just the endless blue sigilled shriek, ripping every last nerve ending raw.

Some part of Matt knew that he was nothing. Yet he was also everything. And everything was pain. The worst pain ever. The pain of being nothing but pain.

He waited for the pain to pass. It didn't. It got worse.

He screamed. The scream was pain too.

He tried to shut his eyes against the blue – then realised he hadn't just *tried.*

The blue wasn't blue anymore. It was black. Red–black. And blobby. The kind of red–black blobbiness you saw when your eyes were closed against a dazzling light. Matt frowned – then realised he'd felt his face move, felt the muscles in his cheeks pull and shift. He clenched his fist. There were his fingers: cold and hard and

trembling. They felt like fat, cold sausages held together by broken cocktail sticks. His whole body felt alien to him, as if the moment he'd existed purely as blue light had been the only real moment in his life.

He opened his eyes.

The blue light was gone. Well – not entirely gone. There were traces and trickles of light all around him. Edges of things, maybe. Glimpses of other things. Stuff in the cave, he supposed. Tomb–bling. Stone columns. But where was everyone else? Shiny sis and the rest of the loser club? Where was Cap'n Fossil and the Moroccan chick?

Though he could move, Matt remained perfectly still, listening. Listening seemed a sensible thing to do, what with all the swordplay and walking–dead types skulking about.

Matt stood alone in the light–spattered darkness and shivered.

The shiver brought feeling back to his entire body. He rubbed away goosebumps on his arms and face – and that was when he realised he was still holding his phone. Well then. Time to throw some light on the proceedings.

Then again what if all he saw were more corpses, a cave full of crawling scorpions?

Hell with it. He could stand here in the dark forever. Or–

Matt turned on the torch.

The darkness became a series of receding edges and planes of light – blue–white, endlessly shifting – as he aimed the phone–torch in different directions. Matt found himself thinking of a hall of mirrors he'd been taken to as a little kid. The place had freaked the hell out of him. It *still* freaked the hell out of him. He took a step sideways, hands outstretched. It was impossible to tell where the shifting reflections were far away or part of a wall against which he would smack his still–aching head if he wasn't careful. He waved his hands around him. No walls. An infinity of reflections, though. Glimmering edges, lines of ice–bright light. He took another step. His hand touched something cold and flat and hard. A sheet of glass, maybe. Blue glass. A mirror?

The assumption was confirmed when, peering closer, Matt saw a startlingly dishevelled figure, dressed exactly like he was, aping his every move. The reflection looked as if he had just bobbed to the surface after a week–long bender. He wore the kind of haunted expression sported more usually by the long–term homeless types he'd occasionally see wandering the shonkier streets of London with their fingerless gloves up for handouts. The kind of guys who looked liked like they wouldn't give two shits about skyping your Converse if they happened to notice you catching a sly forty on some park bench.

The exact kind of guys for whom he had in the past skyped sarnies and/or booze from some ass–a–holic polar–bear-hating Toxaco or other.

Matt peered at his own reflection. His reflection peered back at him with an expression he realised was part curiosity, part disgust.

He laughed, quite suddenly and involuntarily. The sound skipped and danced away from him, whirling and returning, only to leap away again, before arrowing back from what seemed like a dozen completely random directions.

Matt turned. Another mirror image confronted him. He turned again. Images queued up way off into the dark and glassy depths; kaleidoscope reflections of Matt to match the still rolling echoes of his voice.

Matt followed up the laugh with some colourful language he'd been working on in quiet moments between bunking off school and avoiding homework, and this also tumbled hither and yon, near and far, among the shifting planes and edges of light.

*OK, right, well.*

Matt drifted up to his nearest reflection then leaned against the glass wall – well, that was what it felt like anyway. A sudden tiredness was beginning to spread through his body. His head smarted where he'd cracked it those times against the rock walls and roof of the *(Egyptian it was a bloody great Egyptian)* tomb. Matt turned his back on his identically shabby self, and then slid down the smooth glass wall until he was in a sitting position. Fractured iterations of Matt followed suit, receding endlessly. Then, in perfect time with his shabby other selves, he extracted the second of the three cones from his glasses case, and lit up. Instantly the bright glow from his Bic became a thousand glassy sparks, ranged through the Rubik dark like stars in the night sky, smeared into shifting planes and edges by a fractal infinity of glass walls.

He sucked in a long breath and held it. The weed would help keep the fear at bay, because that's what it always did. And after he'd gotten nice and calm he would think about what to do, where he was, and how to get back to the relative normality of *(Egypt it was)* 1911.

Matt found himself seized with another bout of almost irrepressible laughter.

1911.

*Normal.*

He turned, held the cone out to the nearest of his disreputable other selves.

'Toke mate?'

He chuckled, and his other selves chuckled right along with.

'No ta, mate. Got one enni?'

Matt turned off the phone torch – who knew how long the batteries would last? – and sat there in the glimmering darkness, back to back with some dude he barely recognised as himself, steadily reducing his cone from the length of a magic marker to something resembling a twisted roach.

He waited for the thoughts in his head to come into focus but they didn't seem to want to. In fact they seemed quite happy to just sit there and chill, thanks very much. *Just sliding around and, you know, digging the strange–ass P&Q.*

Matt sighed. Alright then. At least he felt calmer now. Maybe he should think about–

A shuddering scream ripped through the darkness.

Matt jerked, dropping the mostly–smoked cone, which fell onto his jeans, still smouldering.

He blinked, batted uselessly at the embers, changed his mind, tried to rise, changed his mind again, tried to grab the remains of the cone so's not to lose it, then felt his arms and legs get all tangled up along with the thoughts in his head, which formed a kind of fog he had to really focus on to push aside.

At which moment there was a rush of violent movement all around him.

More shrieks thundered through the maze of glass. Matt finally managed to struggle upright, just in time to avoid being bowled over by what seemed like an ambling pub brawl, crashing towards him out of the kaleidoscope darkness.

Something loud and heavy and huge smashed to the ground beside him.

Without thinking Matt turned on his phone–torch.

Facing him was – if he was going to be completely honest – the weirdest sight of his entire life.

The Moroccan chick was sitting astride – something – with her arms locked around its throat. The something was huge, and green, and seemed to have – what? – six arms, all of which were actively engaged in trying to kill her, some with blue glass knives, one with what looked like some kind of kitsch-o-matic Flash Gordon raygun made out of blue glass, the rest with nothing but sheer brute strength, which, given the size of the muscles and the thing they belonged to, made the Moroccan chick's fate seemed nothing short of a foregone conclusion.

'Matthew Hansen! Help me!'

The woman's voice was harsh, urgent and control-freakish; the same exact too–urgent tone shiny sis used when dressing him down for some infraction or other. Like the argument this morning about kicking the cat in the–

'MATTHEW HANSEN, HEED MY WORDS!'

'Sorry, what–?'

'KILL IT! *KILL IT NOW!'*

Matt stared, wondering how he was supposed to do that, exactly. Or why he would even want to. It wasn't as if the thing had even done anything to–

Matt suddenly found himself staring askew down the barrel of the ridiculous looking raygun. He jerked back.

There was a brilliant flash of sapphire light and

he remembered thinking, *what the actual*– and then not much else for a while. There was a pretty simple reason for this: the filthy cave he was in was full of bodies – no, call them what they clearly were: *corpses.* As in *dead people.*

In the wildly tumbling light from Matt's phone–torch – falling endlessly, it seemed, from his nerveless fingers – they lay scattered randomly around the stone-slabbed chamber in various states of disarray – as if they had fallen where they stood, without a fight, without understanding they had even fallen.

They were rigid, motionless, eyes open, faces frozen in looks ranging from surprise to fear and everything in between. The whole gamut of human expression. They were dressed simply. Dun coloured clothing, old fashioned pants and shirts, waistcoats. One even sported a striped tie. What looked like a straw boater lay tumbled carelessly to one side. Several were dressed in what looked like pyjamas, or maybe desert robes, or whatever. What colour their skin was, or their clothes really were, Matt could not tell in the fraction of a second glimpse he gained before, stumbling back from them, he felt his shoulders slam against the nearest wall – cold, flat, hard stone – and recoil from it.

Then the phone completed its long fall, hit the ground and bounced away, pursued by madly dancing shadows.

The light went out.

Matt stood perfectly still in the cold darkness, every muscle locked and trembling. His heart felt like it was going to beat itself to death against his ribs. OK, OK. He sucked in a long breath. The air here tasted worse than his first cone. Still. At least it wasn't–

*Something touched his face.*

Matt uttered a strangled gulp and jerked backwards. He crashed into something – wall, roof, whatever – and cracked his head for a *third* time.

'Shit!' Matt exclaimed aloud, then, internally, *all over you and your bright ideas, Mallory.*

His hands windmilled furiously but whatever had touched his face – bug, cobweb, stray breeze, cruel intention, whatever – was gone. For a moment the brilliant, dazzling thread of agony brought every thought into sharp focus. The cave wasn't a cave – it was a *tomb.* An ancient tomb full of newly dead. Well – if the phrase *newly dead* could even apply to people who lived more than a century ago. Or – Matt rubbed his head and groaned when his finger came away wet with blood – was it even *ago?* After all he was *here,* wasn't he? As in *here and now.* So – what was *now* anyway? Was it it actually *now,* or really just *then?* Could *now* be in two places at once? As in, the *here and now,* 1911 or whatever, and the *then and now,* as in the twenty–first century, the one place he would have rated himself with an absolute–zero chance of ever escaping from, and yet somehow *had* escaped from.

Escape.

Escape, yeah, OK.

That might actually be a good place to start. A good word to latch on to. Something to counteract the scalding pain in his head, the sharp electric buzz shaking his body from head to toe, the imminent sense that he was about to puke with creosotic enthusiasm all over those self–same toes and their graffiti–scrawled Converse if he wasn't, like, on the super–thrifty side, man.

OK, then. *Escape.*

Matt focused on the word. He leaned against the cold, dry stone at his back. He blinked coloured blobs of pain from his eyes. He snagged a skanky string of tissue from his pocket and dabbed the side of his head, letting a chunk of tissue stick there, hoping it would help the blood clot and wondering if the wound was bad enough to get infected. Which would be just thing he needed right now, for sure. A brain infection, FYI. And why not? It would just about fill up the last remaining clean space in the bowl of shit–soup he called his life. Shiny sis already thought his brain was sick enough for two. *Wouldn't want to disappoint, shiny sis.*

Matt sighed, aware his heart was racing when, finally, it began to slow.

Escape.

OK.

Right then.

Time to, like, blow this scene, man. Find the sis. Find the wrong side of the

Moroccan chick's flatscreen and get his ass very seriously back to the *right* side; for which read: the future, Mallory, and a week's worth of the biggest cones skyped bling could buy.

For all of which he would need light – and therefore his phone.

Matt slid down to the floor. The stone wall at his back bumped and scraped. Art? Writing? Wasn't that what stone–age tombs were supposed to be full of? He didn't care. It didn't matter anyway, because he wouldn't be here long enough to do anything other than wave goodbye. Down at floor level, things felt even weirder. It was cold, a cold draft drifted across the stone flooring. And there was a rustling sound, a sense of something moving. Bugs, he supposed. Or bits of trash drifting in the breeze.

He began to feel around. Soft, squishy things. Soft, squishy, stinky, *unpleasant* things. OK, try here then. Or how about–

Matt's groping fingers touched a familiar shape. He sighed. *Finally.* His fist clenched around the phone – at the exact moment that *another fist clenched about his.*

Matt tore his hand from – *no, no, no, there was no way that could be another* – scrambled backwards until his head and shoulders were pressed against the wall.

*Something moved in the darkness.*

It was a bug. 'Course it was. Just another over–affectionate bug, like the one which had cuddled up to his face.

Matt thumbed the phone's torch battery. Light bloomed, blinding white. He cursed, turned the phone so the torch beam rotated away from his eyes.

The chamber filled with light.

Matt blinked away the second wave of coloured blobs to obscure his vision in as many minutes. The sight which greeted him brought a scream to his throat – and froze it there.

The entire chamber was *moving.* It was *crawling.*

*Scorpions.*

Matt gulped. Bugs were one thing. But scorpions could–

Blue light flickered through the chamber.

Matt blinked.

*What now–?*

The floor *moved.* It *heaved.*

The first of the corpses littering the chamber jerked upright, dressed in scorpions, eyes crackling with blue fire. More scorpions crawled through its long filthy hair, more still in and out of its gaping mouth.

The corpse turned. It *looked* at him.

It began to move.

Matt turned and

opened his eyes, finding himself face to face with – well, another face. But not like any face he'd ever seen before. Well. Outside of a B–movie bit–torrent anyway.

The face was huge – twice as large as his own. It was smoothly pebbled. It was

green, where it wasn't roughly painted with threads of deep blue or pale salmon. There was no hair. But there were teeth. *Lots* of teeth. Some of them were very big, and curved, and kind of... sideways–looking.

'Hnh,' he muttered, not quite coherently. 'Tusks, then.'

The face before him moved. It shivered. A sound like a hippopotamus snorting ten gallons of river–water bubbled out from between the tee – the *tusks,* along with about half a pint of slimy, pale green drool. Eyes the size of cereal bowls blinked open. The eyes, too, were green. A rich green with hints of shimmering amber. Matt blinked his own eyes right along with those vast others. The thought e*co–friendly* drifted pastorally through his head. Afterwards he could never think why.

The green eyes narrowed, paying him what suddenly seemed like far too much attention.

**'ARRRRRWE TRAAAALLLLING RIIV.'**

The thing's voice was a vast, resonant boom.

Matt yelped in pain, clapped his hands over his ears and struggled into a sitting position. The green thing sat up too – and suddenly Matt was looking up at the huge face – past arms which hung from six different shoulders. The arms were unbelievably well muscled – not to put too fine a point on it, they looked as if they could rip a Honda Civic from boot to bonnet – and the six–fingered hands hanging off the ends of each arm were roughly the size of dustbin lids. *They* looked like they could throw engine blocks to the moon – for a living.

**'ARWE TRALLING RIV.'**

If Matt had thought the thing's previous utterance was loud, this one – he guessed the equivalent of a shout – was very nearly enough to liquefy his eardrums. Matt felt his chest rattle – as if his ribs were being shaken apart by the very finest subwoofer hard cash could hire for the gig.

Matt was aware of being dragged to his feet. Now he was face to face with the still–seated green thing. 'What now–?' He wriggled defiantly until the hand let him go. When he turned he was stunned to see the Moroccan chick, who'd been holding him, toes barely touching the ground, by the collar, with one hand. Her face was a thundercloud. She treated him to a scathing glance and turned her attention back to the green thing, which was busy hoisting itself upright on legs as thick as Victorian pillar boxes. She marched up to it, put her hands – they looked pretty badly burned, actually – against the vast wall of its chest and pushed with her whole body weight. The green thing sat down with a kind of muted wail, snorting more hippo–noises. The Moroccan chick cosied up to the thing's face and – though it was about a metre taller than her even when sitting – somehow managed to give the appearance of towering over it.

*'Stay down.'*

Her voice was not quite sharp enough to skin a cat.

Incredibly the green thing *winced,* and Matt realised he was watching the mother of all barefaced bluffs. There was no way the Moroccan chick could take the green thing. No *way.*

But the green thing stayed down. And now Matt also realised all the blades and

the Buck Rogers raygun it had been trying to kill her with when last he'd been awake were now slung on a belt tied across her shoulders and around her waist, *bandolero*–style.

*Props,* he thought, and also, *hot, much?*

With the green thing parked once more in a sitting position, the Moroccan chick turned back towards Matt. She chewed her lip as if mulling over what to do with them both, then shook her head in the same way shiny sis had done often enough to be irksome.

'I told you to kill it, Matthew Hansen, and you let it shoot you.'

*... er, yeah, about that...*

'If you were not brother to my friend–'

The Moroccan chick scowled.

Matt wondered what to do with the scowl. He supposed he could just ignore it, same as shiny sis. In fact, the more he thought about that, the better an idea it seemed.

'Screw you, Mister Magoo,' he muttered with as much contempt as he could muster. He turned to walk away – then stopped when he realised there was no–where to walk away *to.*

Behind them was a blue glass wall, a vast reflective surface with a large irregular hole torn in it. Shards of blue glass lay scattered in piles on the dun–coloured landscape. Matt stumbled to a halt – it seemed to take a *really* long time – was he *still* stoned? – staring upwards, following the glass wall higher... and higher... and *higher*... when the angle was just about high enough to make his neck creak protestingly, the glass wall was replaced by a sky the colour of pale rose quartz. Higher still, two huge moons tumbled through the sky, lumpy and irregular and a dull black–bronze in colour. Between the moons a cloud of bright sparks hung like a swarm of fireflies. Matt had no idea what they were but they looked like footage he'd seen of tracer fire on youtube videos of the conflict in the middle–east.

**'ARWE TRALLING RIV.'**

At this distance the green thing's voice wasn't quite loud enough to stun a cow.

The Moroccan chick's voice came again, less harsh this time. 'We are *not* travelling the river.'

Finally Matt turned around. There was a question burning a hole in his head and he had to ask it.

Before he could speak the Moroccan chick sighed.

'Yes, Matthew. This is another planet.'

'And...' He glanced at the green thing.

'And this is an alien. He's a child, like you, so it seems.'

Matt closed his eyes and let out a long, frustrated sigh.

*Which probably explains why he was scared of us enough to attack us.*

The green thing began to rumble again. The Moroccan chick half turned – and the rumble subsided to a low mutter.

Matt favoured the green thing with a more sympathetic glance. 'Don't even trip, man. She scares me witless too.'

The Moroccan chick glared. Matt sighed. He reached into his pocket for the

remains of his penultimate cone. Something told him – despite every single one of his better judgements – it was probably time to start making friends.

He lit the cone and offered it to the Moroccan chick.

'Wanna smoke?'

She stared, sniffed, took the cone. She held it for a long time as if weighing it against evidence Matt was not currently privy to.

Matt waited. Maybe she was down *on* drugs, not *with* them. Some were, he'd heard: page 404 where their smarts should be *et-cetera-ad-nauseum*. Her loss if so. Because nothing - but *nothing* - could numb your pain like a prize-winning cone.

Finally, as if making a heavy decision, she took a long drag, sighed, and tilted her head to one side, studying Matt thoughtfully.

'I did not take you for a healer. Did you steal this ritual medication?'

Matt recoiled at the inference. 'No,' he protested indignantly. 'Anyway, what's it to you if I did?'

The Moroccan chick took another drag, handling the cone delicately because of her burned hands.

'You surprise me.'

Matt sighed, remembering the headmaster, the canal and the cat. 'I get that a lot.'

He retrieved the cone and turned to the green thing, still hunkered down in a squatting position, then extended his hand. The green thing also studied him closely. Then it studied the cone. It, too, inhaled deeply, producing a sound something like a stretched–out backfire. It reached for the cone but its fingers – half as long as Matt's forearm – were too big to grasp it easily, resulting in a sound which, while loud enough to make Matt cover his ears, also somehow made him think of a tearful child denied candy by an overly strict parent.

'Yeah, well, you're probably too young anyway.' Matt switched hands with the cone and then snagged one of the green thing's four smallest fingers. 'Upsy daisy, big guy. You can give us the two–cent tou–'

Matt fell over backwards as the green thing rose – not under its own strength but, incredibly, pulled upright by Matt himself. Matt lost his balance, skidding backwards through the dun coloured desert scrub as the green thing described a vast arc above his head, eventually returning to the ground in a thunderous pile of thrashing limbs some thirty metres away.

*What the actual–*

Somehow the cone had survived his fall. Matt struggled upright, taking a deep drag. He held the smoke in as long as he could, relishing the burn, trying to find the calm place. Thirty metres away, the green thing was also struggling gamely to its feet, seemingly none – or at least very little – the worse for its unexpected flight.

The Moroccan chick, who was looking at him as if she knew something he didn't, smiled faintly.

'A healer *and* a warrior,' she murmured.

'Give me a break,' Matt muttered then sat down hard to finish the cone and chew over his new–found superpowers.

This was how things were for a while: Matt, hunkered on the lumpy desert scrub

considering the R-rated *fecktasia* of a thing they'd somehow fallen up to their necks in; the green thing, thirty metres closer to the glass – city, whatever – jacking himself upright as ponderously as any junkyard crane with a claw full of crushed car; and finally the Moroccan chick peering from one of them to the other long enough for her brief but actually kind–of pleasant smile to be booted offside by the disapproving look of a kindergarten teacher struggling very hard not to scold two young but persistent troublemakers. Given that the exact same look was glued daily to shiny sis's face like cheap make–up, this was an expression Matt was entirely too familiar with.

He put up with this attitude for as long as he could, which was about five minutes longer than the cone took to smoke, by which time his small but highly necessary buzz had almost completely evaporated.

'Man,' he said finally. 'Don't be such a manky mope–o–saurus.'

A furrow appeared between the Moroccan chick's eyebrows. 'There are times and places,' she said quietly, 'Where men's tongues have been removed for addressing their Pharaoh in this tone.'

'Yeah, well, lucky for me you're not a Pharaoh, I guess,' Matt sighed. 'Thanks for the history lesson though.'

He got to his feet and strolled towards the green thing. It was fully upright now, though it seemed a bit wobbly on its boulder–like feet. Matt stared at those feet – whose ankles were roughly the height of Matt's knees – and resolved not to get too close.

'Hey buddy,' he said. 'Sorry about that. I guess I don't know my own strength.'

The green head swivelled, lowered, aimed itself at Matt. The saucer–sized eyes studied him closely. Then the mouth cracked open in a smile which, had Matt been even a tad less stoned might actually have caused him to pass water, while a sound like a small earthquake burst forth between the razor–sharp daggers which passed for teeth. Matt took a step back but, when no further violence was forthcoming, began to think that the sound might actually have been a laugh – or the green thing's equivalent of amusement, anyway.

Not knowing what else to do, Matt stuck out his hand. 'Shake?'

The green thing's mouth opened even wider. Those *teeth.*

**'SHAAAAAAAAKE. UUUPSEEE–DAAAISEEE.'**

One of the green thing's hands closed entirely around Matt's arm. Then, his ears filled with rumbling laughter as loud and violent as any train crash, Matt found himself flying through the air. A moment later he slammed against the towering wall of glass. The breath was driven out of him. He slid to the ground – about twenty metres, a lethal fall under Earth gravity – and sat there for a moment, shaking his head.

The green thing lumbered up to him, stuck out some of its hands.

**'SHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAKE.'**

Matt shook his head. 'I guess I deserved that.'

The Moroccan chick ran lightly towards them both, snagged Matt's hand and yanked him to his feet. 'When you two have finished playing, we have work to do.'

'Seriously?' Matt struggled to control his anger. 'We're on an alien planet with a giant...' he stared up at the green thing, completely at a loss for words, '… and all you can think of is *work?'*

The Moroccan chick's eyes narrowed. 'Look around. Can you see Ibrahim or Andy? Do you not want to know where they are? Are you not concerned for your sister?'

Matt opened his mouth – then closed it again without speaking.

*I'm pretty concerned about what a certain Mallory might be up to back in the House of Bling.*

The Moroccan chick stared from Matt to the green thing and back again, then shook her head.

*'What* then?' Matt's stomach knotted up. All the old bitterness. 'What do *you* suggest we do?'

'We are strangers in a strange land.' The Moroccan chick glanced at the green thing. 'His land.'

Matt struggled to control his frustration. 'Him? Help us? He can't even understand us. Not to mention he's, y'know, a *giant green alien,* FYI.'

The Moroccan chick frowned but said nothing. Some of Matt's annoyance began to drain away. Here was one difference between the Moroccan chick and shiny sis. Shiny sis never backed down, even when she was wrong, which naturally enough was pretty much all the time. Despite her demonstrably hair–trigger predilection for personal violence the Moroccan chick didn't seem *quite* so unable to negotiate.

So Matt put his mouth firmly into park and waited to see what would happen.

After a couple of minutes thought, the Moroccan chick said, 'We arrived in there,' she indicated the ramparts of the blue glass – Matt decided to call it a city, because constantly wondering what it might actually be would drive him mad. 'Andy and Ibrahim probably did too. We should look for them there.'

Decision made, she began to walk back along the shimmering blue ramparts to the gateway they'd exited through.

The green thing's head swivelled to watch her go. Then it swivelled back to cover Matt, its huge eyes blinked, and then, without further ado, it ambled off in the Moroccan chick's wake, leaving tracks in the dunes as deep as any Imperial ATAT troop carrier.

Matt sighed.

*Shiny sis better appreciate the effort, that's all.*

He set off after the others, along the edge of the city.

High above him the firefly sparks of distant grumbling explosions spread across the rose-quartz sky between the two lumpen, iron–black moons.

**From the Account of Andrea Hansen**
**II**
**Battle in the Sky**

When the pain and the ice–blue light faded, Andy found herself on the deck of what looked for all the world like a ship out of the Arabian Nights, surrounded on all sides by explosions: palls of smoke large enough to make the fires of middle–eastern oil fields look like a council firework display on a dank and drizzly night. Somewhere above, faintly visible through the veils of smoke, two lumpy black moons scribed tracks in a rose-quartz sky. Andy kind of glossed over the moons (and the sky), because she was too wholeheartedly busy with the preposterously *Sinbadassedness* of her more immediate surroundings.

The ship was huge, seemingly made not of wood but glass, with too many masts – some of which stuck out *sideways?* – its sails in rags and manned by what seemed in all earnestness to be figments out of some deranged post–modern rocket–and–rapier fantasy. For a start they were red – as in deep, coppery, mahogany red. For a second – Andy blinked – *how tall?* For a third–

Andy uttered a startled gulp. For a third–

Andy never completed her shortlist of impossible things. Something more immediately significant distracted her.

From the rolling black swathes surrounding the ship, three other craft emerged, barrelling out of the smoke and trailing it in vast streamers from their masts and rigging. These ships were smaller but seemed to show even more sail than the vessel she was on. Like meteors they fell upon the ship Andy had awoken on, cannons blazing as they–

Wait.

*Cannons?*

Andy had no time to think before green people even stranger than the red sailors crewing the ship she was on began to swing out of the fog of smoke on lines long enough to shame black–ops helicopter assault troops.

That the new arrivals were intelligent, Andy had no doubt. They seemed to have six arms apiece – plenty for rope acrobatics and hand–to–hand combat with the red people. Each carried four weapons – curved blades and what looked like glass rayguns – and they used them with a deadly intent and accuracy that could only be the province of intelligence. In response the red people – men and women, Andy noted with only minor hysteria, sporting just the *normal* number of limbs, though each was unnaturally long now she came to think about it – fought back with ferocious determination which, to begin with at least, seemed more than a match for their attackers.

But there were more green men than red, and the tide of violence soon turned to favour what Andy quickly realised must be pirates. *Green* pirates. Andy had encountered her fair share of fantastic situations before – but nothing like this. Nothing so overtly, impossibly, preposterous. In short nothing which could not be explained by anything other than a fever–or–drug–fuelled hallucination of the very highest quality.

Andy's disbelieving reverie was interrupted by the rude arrival of a green man on the deck before her. Even before his feet had thudded into the deck, the pirate was turning towards her, three arms whirling, long curved blades looping around and down towards her in a vicious three–way scissor–action. The third sword was aimed low, and in the split–second Andy had to think, she realised ducking would only get one or more of those swords buried in her skull. Jumping was impossible because no–one could jump the height of a man from a standing start–

Afterwards, Andy realised it had probably been a good thing she *hadn't* been thinking. And of course, she hadn't. All her Fight Club training flew instantly out the window with the first rush of adrenaline. Andy simply jumped, up and away from the green pirate, with every ounce of a fight–or–flight response she could control no more than she could stop the stars in their tracks.

Andy had a split second to register that the astonishment of the green pirate was apparently no less than her own, before she found herself thudding shoulders first into a mast spar which had to be more than forty metres from the deck.

Tangled in the rigging, Andy tried desperately to come to terms with her preposterous acrobatic ability – to no avail. Her dazed mind simply chased its own tail for precious seconds while stupid gulping sounds emerged in an uncontrolled stream from her throat. Finally a sensible thought percolated through the dementia. It would take only seconds for the pirate to realise where she was and follow her. Maybe he'd just shoot her with his glass raygun. But the pirate had overcome his shock much faster than Andy – he was already deep in combat, fighting off an assault by five of the red crew, attacking with short blades and glass rayguns of their own.

Shrugging off the tangle of lines, Andy swung herself onto the spar and hunkered back against the mainmast, watching as the attack progressed. Now the questions that

would normally have demanded her attention the moment she arrived crowded into her head with the bloody–minded enthusiasm of an amateur rugby scrum. Who were these people? Where was she? How had she got here? Seconds before she'd been in an Egyptian tomb in 1911, fending off a very different type of attacker. Wherever this was, it wasn't Egypt – and it it certainly wasn't any 1911 that ever existed in *her* universe.

So where then? And how?

And never mind where was the idiot bro', and Erimem, and Ibrahim?

Andy's mind described a contracting spiral around these conceptual focal points long enough for the shock to begin to subside. In this she was fortunate because her previous experience of time travel went a long way towards nullifying what for anyone else would almost certainly have resulted in hysterical catatonia. After what seemed like hours but was more nearly a few minutes, she managed to get her breathing and heart rate back under control. Her vision expanded from the narrow shock–tunnel self–defence trainers describe to a wider perspective. What she saw did not make her think she was in any less danger.

One green pirate ship had drawn alongside the red ship, while the two others stood off to port and starboard. The closer ship had tethered itself firmly with hundreds of anchor lines. The green skinned pirates were swarming aboard, leaping over the deck rails and swinging across on long lines, weapons drawn. The red crew were falling back to defensive positions, wielding their strange looking rayguns, loosing crackling blasts of intense blue energy at their savage attackers. Despite their losses, the pirates were cutting a swathe through the red defences, and Andy took a moment to wonder exactly what might be in the ship's holds to warrant such a colossal disregard for life. As she thought this, a massive series of explosions erupted from the port bow of the ship. At first Andy thought the ship's magazine – she assumed it had one – must have been breached but then she realised the blue flashes were a broadside aimed at the pirate vessel off the port bow. Following the blue flashes a cascade of distant blue explosions crackled across the starboard deck and masts of the pirate ship, which lurched away into the fog of thick black smoke, trailing streamers of blue fire from the rags of its sails and rigging.

Andy heard a shout lift clear above the hideous din of the attack. She turned awkwardly, bracing herself in a slightly less precarious position against the shaking mast before peering down into the banks of smoke wreathing the deck. After a moment she made out a figure running across the stern deck. A red sailor – a woman – twin guns held like flintlock pistols pulsing blue lightning to clear her path. Pirates tumbled away from her, burned and screaming at the touch of the blue fire. Andy found the woman's progress hypnotic. She moved slowly, deliberately, with an absolutely intractable line, her burnished copper-mahogany skin, decorated with strange tattoos, shining with blue fire. She seemed to be heading for a series of wide hatches running in two rows down the port and starboard mid–decks. Hatches the green skinned pirates also seemed interested in. The red woman forged on, apparently unafraid of the green giants blocking her path. But more pirates were closing from all sides. Either she was very important, Andy realised, or the cargo

was. Andy shifted position to keep the red woman in sight – and at that exact moment a series of sharp reports echoed from somewhere out of view. A series of whistling projectiles cut through the sails and rigging below. The mast emitted an alarming *crack,* then swayed sharply. Andy felt her balance shift. She reached out to grab the nearest rigging – but it flailed away from her at the last moment. Her fingers brushed the spun glass line – and then she was falling. At the last second she managed to plant her feet against the spar and push off. A moment later she crashed into the deck between the red woman and a knot of attackers, bowling forward with a cry of pain and knocking them aside like ninepins. Before she could recover her wits a hand grabbed hers and yanked her upright. She found herself face to face with the red woman – well, face to chest anyway – for the red sailor stood at least an arm's length taller than Andy, who blinked as the woman's body – decorated with more tattoos and what looked like surgically implanted jewels – thudded against her and she was indecorously pushed aside.

**'Youarunarm!'**

The red sailor's voice was deep, as warm and exotic as the smell from her skin. Andy yelped something brainless, using her free hand to force open the huge fist whose six long fingers were wrapped almost twice around her forearm.

The red sailor complained incomprehensibly as Andy dropped to the deck.

Her complaint was cut off by the approach of more green–skinned pirates. They advanced in leaps and bounds from all sides, a vast horde overrunning the red ship.

The red woman's arms came up, glass pistols resting on Andy's shoulders, alongside her head. At the same time, driven by what she later thought of a kind of Jacksonian insanity, Andy reached forward, snagged the two spare pistols holstered at the red sailor's hips and aimed them around the red woman's waist at the attackers she could see. All four pistols fired at once. Blue lightning enveloped Andy's head and arms. She yelled, well, anyway, she made some kind of noise that she didn't hear over the din. Green pirates dissolved into crackling blue fire.

The red sailor took a step backwards, breaking their momentary contact. Andy was left holding the pistols and wearing a stupidly sheepish expression.

'Anyway, that's me right? Sudden death in straight denims and an Iron Maiden T–shirt.'

The red sailor stared. Andy caught a hint of the her scent and blushed.

'Er, yeah, sorry, these are yours, right...' she mumbled, holding out the pistols.

The woman's wide eyes narrowed suddenly to thin vertical slits – which was was weird, but also somehow hot – and Andy gulped. '… so... er... I guess you'll be wanting them back then...'

The red sailor's head tilted to one side. **'Youwhi,'** she said in a deeply puzzled rumble. **'Youwhiteman.'**

'White yes.' Andy blinked. 'But, lady, if you think I'm a man, you've got *serious* issues.'

The red sailor shook her head abruptly. Her eyes widened and she pushed past Andy towards the nearest deck hatch, beyond which green pirates seemed to be setting what could only be explosive charges.

**'Loosetheiron–'**

Andy stared. 'I'm sorry, what–?'

**'Isaidloosetheiron! Thecargonow! Beforethegreenmen–'**

There was a sudden series of explosions and the nearest hatches blew upwards into the air, disintegrating into shreds of spun glass, followed by a fountain of trash from belowdecks.

Andy yelped.

At the same time the main mast – the same mast which Andy had been hiding out on only moments before – emitted a second ear–splitting *crack* and began to topple over towards the deck.

Without thinking, Andy shouldered the red sailor aside and threw up her hands to defend herself. The mast struck her arms, driving her feet hard into the deck, then – incredibly – bounced off and rolled away, trailing sails and rigging, to smash a hole in the deck rails and tumble over the side. Andy waited for a huge splash and waterspout. None came. She barely had time to register this new impossibility, when the tangle of rigging trailing behind the mast snagged both her and the red sailor, and they were dragged together through the wide break in the deck rail and over the side of the ship.

When she saw what was underneath her, and why there had been no splash, Andy felt a cold shock of primal terror run through her body. Under the ship was... nothing. No waves. No ocean. Just rippling billows of thick black smoke framing thousands of feet of empty sky and then the ground, a patchwork quilt of brown and beige and dun coloured blotches which must be valleys and hills – maybe even mountains – towards which she and the red woman were dragged in the wake of the disintegrating mast, sails and rigging.

Tumbling through space, a sick, cold, broken elevator sensation pulsing through her stomach and head, Andy caught a momentary glimpse of the sky above her: the red ship, its hull torn open in more places than she could count, dazzling blue flames bursting out of the gaping chasms with a thick cloud of debris while dozens of her crew, rendered tiny with distance, were leaping overboard to avoid the explosions, falling in all directions, including – impossibly – *upwards,* accompanied by thin, distant screams.

Falling, Andy had a moment – maybe a little more – to regret the missed opportunities in her life, which basically boiled down to two things: never having kissed the one person she really loved, and never having kicked her brother's perfectly problematic ass in the way he truly, *meaningfully* deserved. Then, as the regret began to turn into a scream – not fear but sheer frustration – something cold and glass–like and only mildly yielding smashed into her body, and the breath was crushed out of her. She uttered a brief, startled gulp – even this was a considerably achievement under the circumstances – rolling onto her back in time to catch a brief glimpse of the red woman abseiling in her wake, having snagged a ragged swathe of sail, in the second before the wreckage of the mast and the balance of the rigging and sails slammed into the hard surface which had so unexpectedly broken her fall.

Curled into a ball to avoid the rain of wreckage, Andy could only fight the

resurgence of frustrated anger and promise herself she would get to the bottom of this insanity if it killed her – if it didn't *actually* kill her first.

Moments after it began the storm of junk had passed. The pirate ship on which she'd landed was now listing badly to port, threatening to cast off a baker's dozen of the huge, multi–limbed sailors into the great pink yonder. Andy struggled to her feet, her head ringing, only to fall again as a sizeable portion of the deck collapsed beneath her feet.

Her new fall was brief, and ended with a bone–jarring thump which put a crick in her back for hours, among a mess of barrels and crates and ropes and other sky–faring junk, none of which she could put a name to.

Andy groaned, closing her eyes and hoping against all hope she would actually lose consciousness, not even slightly surprised when life bore out all rumours supporting the theory that it was simply not that cooperative.

When Andy opened her eyes she found herself an arm's length from a familiar face.

'Ibrahim,' she mumbled thickly. 'You're a bright spark. So if I happen to mention the phrase, "Just thought I'd drop in," will you please man up and throw me out of the nearest porthole?'

Ibrahim gaped in sheer astonishment. 'What–? Where–? How–?' The goldfish thing he had going on was almost cute. For an older guy.

'OK then,' Andy shook her head to try to clear the sound of distant church bells. Or ship's bells. Or whatever. She clambered to her feet, staring around quickly, identifying their surroundings as some kind of below decks store–room. 'We can save the big questions for later. In the meantime, let's get the heck out of dodge, agreed?'

Ibrahim shook his head slowly, gulping smoke tainted air like a fish out of water. She could see he was trying to frame more words but – perhaps unsurprisingly given the circumstances – they didn't come.

Then against all odds Ibrahim did actually produce words.

'Andy,' he said over–brightly. 'You're...' he frowned. 'Did you throw up?'

Andy glanced down at her clothes and sighed. 'So much for the romance of free fall.' She turned to the door of the store–room, brushing ineffectually at her clothes. 'Come on for heaven's sake, look lively. If we ended up here I dread to think what a world of hurt Matt must be up to his neck in in.'

She reached the door of the store–room in a few steps. She studied it for a moment. Glass fibre sheets bound with some kind of straps... no sign of a lock but presumably that was on the other side. She flexed her fingers, wondering how much force she would have to exert to shred the door and make good their escape.

At that exact moment the door opened, and three green pirates shoved a disgruntled figure hard into the room. Unable to step aside in time, Andy once again found herself tangled head–to–chest with the distractingly bejewelled red woman, now *sans* abseil.

*'Princess!'*

The shout was one of purest delight, in a deep male voice Andy did not recognise. She frowned, struggled to turn, failed, then found herself hoisted into the air by a

familiar arm and hand – the cost of which was a painful set of bruises on her left arm to match those on on her right – and tossed aside as if little more than an inconvenient encumbrance.

The red woman crossed the store room in three long strides, and Andy caught sight of her destination, a tough–looking man in his thirties dressed in clothes that for some reason seemed vaguely familiar.

***'HOWWARRRRR!'***

Andy assumed that near–subsonic rumble in the red woman's voice was pleasure. The enthusiasm of the hug with which she swept up the tough–looking man seemed to bear out this theory.

'Ribs, Djora, ribs.' The tough–looking man grinned painfully as the red woman put him down, and the two went into an immediate *hugger–mugger* which had Andy feeling like a kid no–one wanted in the gang.

A hand on her shoulder made her turn. 'Slow down, hotstuff,' Ibrahim told her softly. 'There's a lot going on here you don't know about yet.'

Andy made a questioning look. By way of reply Ibrahim led her to the corner of the room and hunkered down beside a collapsed pile of crates and barrels.

'Hotstuff?' Andy frowned.

Ibrahim made a pained face. 'Andy I'm so sorry. I appear to be having an Allan Quartermain kind of a day. The stress, you see. I'm not entirely used to it.'

'Quartermain?' Andy's face creased into a questioning expression.

Ibrahim blinked and shook his head. 'Never mind.'

Andy's expression cleared. 'Use of metaphor in life-or-death moments. Props.'

'I confess it's not my normal modus operandii.'

'Really?' Andy struggled to keep a narky tone from her voice.

'Oh no, not at all. Normally I'd retire to my office for a soothing tisane and ten minutes of Classic FM. Then again you're looking at the man for whom the daily median pivotal moment revolves around - to pull a random example from the ether - whether or not to display the Divje Babe Neanderthal cave-bear-bone flute as the flagship item in the Museum's Neolithic Collection.'

Andy stared.

'Ibrahim, what *are* you babbling about?'

'It doesn't matter. The point is we've somewhat queered the pitch for our friends over there.' Ibrahim jerked a thumb back towards the two–person scrum whispering in the corner of the store room.

'That's funny, because I sort of gathered the impression I saved her life, actually.'

'Which would have been all well and good – if they hadn't been on a secret mission.'

'Secret...?' Andy blinked, struggling to keep up.

'And actually *trying* to get captured by the Green Men.'

'Captured.'

'Ward was explaining it to me before you... well, y'know,' Ibrahim shot a brief but meaningful glance up at the jagged hole in the deck above their heads.

'Ward?'

'Howard – Howard Carter. The *guy* – with the *Princess.'*

'Howard... the Egyptologist? You mean – *Tutankhamun* Howard Carter?'

'Sshh!' Ibrahim put a finger to his lips. 'He hasn't done that yet.'

Andy stared. Quite suddenly she realised why the man's clothes seemed familiar. She'd last seen them worn by one of the dead men in the tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

'Don't forget, it's only 1911 when he comes from.'

'A secret mission.' The tough looking man – Carter – turned his attention to Andy and Ibrahim. 'Not so secret now, of course. We – that is Princess Djora and I – wanted to get captured by the Green Men – our mission was to acquire intelligence concerning their military dispossession, troop movements and so forth.'

Andy frowned, feeling horribly left behind. '… mission...?'

Carter nodded. 'Including their connection to the Paladin.'

'Paladin?'

'The Goddess. The Queen of Two Worlds.' The tough–looking man waited for Andy to react and when she didn't, added, in what was clearly meant to be the definitive clarification, 'The Lost Pharaoh.'

'Pharaoh?

'Of Maahes.'

'Of Mars.'

*'Maahes.'* Ibrahim corrected Andy's pronunciation. 'The name of this world. And not incidentally, I suspect, an ancient Egyptian deity. The lion–headed god of war.'

**'Warrrrr,'** the red woman rumbled, eyes narrowed to thin vertical slits.

'Which is exactly what the Princess and I are trying to prevent,' Carter added.

Andy must have looked as blank as she felt, because Carter pulled a small badge from his shirt pocket. Some kind of authority or insignia, Andy found herself thinking, carved from what seemed like a shard of deep blue glass, embellished with gold.

'A war we think has been provoked by our enemy,' Carter repeated, as if for the hard of thinking.

Andy stared at the badge. Engraved on it was a face. An older face but one Andy had precisely zero problems recognising because she'd last seen it lying inside her best friend's tomb. She took the badge and ran one finger across Erimem's finely sculpted face.

'The Pharaoh of Maahes.'

**From the Account of Matthew Hansen**
**III**
**A City of Glass and Ghosts**

The most surprising thing about finding oneself on an alien planet, Matt thought, was how super–fast one became bored. What was the point of a–million–and–one examples of shit–never–before–witnessed–by–human–eyes when there was no network coverage so one could – for example – upload an endless series of meaningless selfies for jolly old facebook to censor?

*Here's me on the alien planet, dude. Beats the Costa seven ways from Sunday.*

*Here's me in the alien city, bro. All made of blue glass. Freaky as Friday.*

*Here's me with the big guy. And yeah he's, like, totally green, man.*

Matt uttered a flat and humourless laugh.

The Moroccan chick flashed him an inscrutable (but almost certainly irritable) look.

Matt met the stare with one of casual dismissal. 'What–?'

The Moroccan chick raised a disdainful eyebrow.

Matt sighed. '–ever,' he finished, flipping tones without missng a beat. As satisfying as it would be to diss her up to the nines, something about the Moroccan chick seemed to compel reason in a way no other adult seemed qualified to. 'If you simply can't live without the truth, I was visualising how my self–obsessed ass–mates would react if they were here instead of me.' Matt rolled his eyes unsympathetically. 'Colour me callous but, honestly, who cares? Not me. Not in this economy.'

The Moroccan chick studied him closely. Matt waited for the stare to go away but the Moroccan chick seemed able to maintain her combative interest with effortless poise.

Somewhere up ahead the big guy had taken a turn into one of the many cross–connecting avenues and temporarily disappeared from sight. That was, except for his reflections, which swirled brokenly around them as if tumbled around the mirrors of some supersized kaleidoscope.

Matt shifted uncomfortably. 'Yeah, well,' he said at length. 'You got me.'

The Moroccan chick was silent, waiting him out.

Matt sighed. 'It's weird here and I'm freaked out, alright? Wouldn't you be? It's an *alien planet*.'

The Moroccan chick clicked her tongue thoughtfully but otherwise said nothing.

Matt struggled to control a surge of anger. 'The air's wierd, the sky's wierd, the freaking gravity's... *wierd.* I feel like I'm falling down a lift shaft stoned every time I take a step.' Matt aimed a vicious kick at the nearest wall. 'And look, man, who knows what kind of freaky shit is going to jump out on us or try to eat us or face-hug us or whatever.'

The Moroccan chick's shiny–sis impersonation finally lessened somewhat.

'Fear under stress is to be expected. Even the gods know fear. But what is on the surface is controlled by what is under the surface. If Antranak was here he would advise you to make your fear your brother, as he has advised many Pharaohs before me.'

'Yeah, well, big shouts to Antranak, whoever *he* is. Make fear your bee–atch, I get it.' Matt screwed up his face as a sideways thought struck him. 'And, yeah, about this, "Pharaoh" shinola–'

'You sister has not spoken of me to you?'

'Duh.'

A blank look.

'Not in so many words.'

'Then things I say may confuse you.'

'As opposed to things you *actually say* which *actually annoy* me, you mean?' Matt produced a perfect no–shit–left–to–give shrug. 'How incredibly *adult* of you. Shiny sis would be *so* proud.'

The Moroccan chick frowned briefly, her brow furrowing in thought, but then her face smoothed out and she seemed to let the matter go.

For some reason this *really* cheesed him off.

'Cos it's totally clear how *close* you two funky lovebirds are–'

To Matt's surprise, the Moroccan chick placed a restraining hand on his arm.

'Sshhh.'

She appeared to still be listening – but not to him.

Matt made as if to pull away, but the hand gripping his arm would not let go. Frowning, Matt leaned into the pull. The Moroccan chick appeared not to notice. Matt was taller and heavier than the Moroccan chick, and he could only guess how much her grip must be hurting her burned hand, yet pulling away from her was apparently not a thing that was going to happen, soon or ever.

'Would you take your hand off my–'

The Moroccan chick let go of Matt's arm so suddenly the force of his own pull propelled him away from her and, under the contributing factor of low gravity, at considerable speed. Matt made a surprised noise, which was about as articulate as he managed to get until he fetched up against a slick glass wall about ten metres back the way they'd come with a thump hard enough to rattle his brains and make things

go blurry for a while.

With a howl loud enough to shake the walls and make the reflections in them shiver, the big guy came hurtling back into the avenue. Three more green things just like him but about twenty percent larger in every direction followed close on his heels. The sound they made was louder than a collapsing building. Matt counted – wait – *eighteen* arms, at least twelve clutching weapons, a fury of granite–slabbed muscle which smashed back through the space where he had been standing only seconds before with a force which would undoubtedly have crushed him had the Moroccan chick not–

Wait. Where was the– oh. There she was. What did she think she was– oh *shit.*

There was a massive *crack* as the Moroccan chick twisted the head of the creature she had hurled herself on top of. Matt gaped. The gigantic head was set really low on the massive shoulders but there must have been a neck because Matt heard it break, a sound like a tractor ripping up a three–hundred year old oak stump. The Moroccan chick leaped clear of the body as it fell, thudding into the floor hard enough to craze the glass. She tumbled as she fell, snagging two of the dead green thing's weapons – curved swords that were very nearly as long as she was tall – long enough for her to use as pikes or spears if she wanted.

She did not want.

Matt shrank back against the wall as a thousand fractured blue–glass reflections of the Moroccan chick, the big guy and his two remaining assailants whirled and tumbled and shrieked and smashed their way through the alien architecture spraying a hail of blue glass shrapnel seven ways from Sunday so that Matt had to cover his head for fear of being sliced to ribbons.

*Bloody hell we can't have been here an hour.*

The thought whirled around Matt's head, as crazed and fractured as any of the reflections whirling around his body. He scrunched up and hunkered down and waited for it all to end, which it persistently didn't. Instead it seemed to get worse. Louder, more violent. And then, as Matt risked a glance out from under the arm covering his face, he saw one of the green things only metres away, three swords raised, two of them already falling towards his head.

Matt yelped and pushed away from the wall in a reflex action, panic hurling him forward at a speed which was frankly ridiculous, under the blades and into the legs of his attacker. Behind him the blades sliced into the glass wall, shredding it, Matt only barely noticed this because his contact with the green thing's legs was hard enough to knock the wind out of him. There was a huge *crack*, a thunderous shriek of pain and Matt careened away from the green thing as it crashed to the ground, its leg bent at such an awkward angle it had to be broken, one sword lost, tumbling away into a far corner. Right there and then Matt had an epiphany. The green things were huge, built like tanks from the waist up, but standing on only two massive legs they were necessarily low to the ground. All their height was in their upper bodies. In the case of his attacker, an upper body which was now just about within Matt's reach. Without thinking he scrambled away from the green thing while it was off balance, flinging himself into the same corner the sword had clattered into. It was huge, yes, but it was

a weapon. His only weapon.

His hand closed over the sword as the green thing lurched forward towards him again. He panicked, grabbed at the weapon, swung it around – then lost his grip, his unexplainable strength completely mismatched to the inertia of the huge weapon. The sword tumbled away as the green thing dragged itself close enough reach Matt who, backed into the corner, found himself with no–where to run.

Desperately Matt kicked – and jumped clear of the low–swinging sword, which slammed into the wall, embedding itself there irretrievably. The green thing was fast though, shifting its weight and altering its other swing so the sword angled towards Matt's body, now falling back towards the ground. The razor sharp blade would have sliced Matt in half if the jammed sword and its broken leg hadn't put the green thing just enough off balance so that the blade slid alongside Matt's head, shaving off a swathe of hair instead of actually disembowelling him.

*Great,* Matt thought. *Now I look like Marilyn Manson.*

Matt smacked into the ground, head ringing, barely able to register the green thing's last remaining sword descending for a killing blow. Instinctively Matt reached up to ward off the blow – a gesture which on any other world would have cost him an arm at the very least – and his hands closed convulsively around the green thing's massive wrist. Matt kicked again, desperate to escape, to find some distance. Only after the trajectory of his leap brought him crashing down did he realise he was not being followed. A shaky glance told him why: the green thing's forearm – gushing sticky blue–black blood and with its fist still knotted around its sword hilt – was firmly clutched in Matt's hands.

*'What the actual–'*

Matt dropped the arm. More blood gushed over his feet and lower legs.

The world seemed to vanish down a long dark tunnel. The sounds of the fight became strangely distant.

Matt sat down and threw up.

He was still sitting there, dazed, in a lake of blood and puke, when the green – *not dead how could it not be* – thing lurched towards him one last time, still spouting steaming blood onto the slick glass, all five of its remaining fists raised in what would undoubtedly be killing blows. Matt barely had time to register the new attack when a second green giant hurled itself from the glittering shadows and fell upon his attacker. It was the big guy, his fists mailed with shards of blue glass. Matt scrambled backwards, feet slipping in the muck lapping at his ass as the thundering shitstorm of brawling giants rolled clean over him.

Matt had a brief glimpse of his own horrified face reflected in the big guy's vast eye, then a huge and flailing fist full of blue glass slammed into him. For the second time in as many hours, blue lightning filled his head, and Matt

was glassdreaming when the elders came for his father.

He woke from sleeplife with a head full of the strangest images. White Men with only two arms, tiny figures, smaller even than a child's playdoll, yet somehow living. Brother, sister; father, mother; death and loss; names he did not understand, endless

pain he did.

Matt's body shook from the glassdream, all six arms and both legs thumping wildly against the worn sleepstone as he struggled to reach back into himself. Far from sleeplife, out in the shadowed now, First Father's squarecave rang with voices, accusations, bellowed warnings. Matt tumbled from his bedslab, worn to a comfortable shape by generations of First Father's kin–that–were, taking the glass–bodied infant *maahes* in its scarred lightning bottle with him as he tumbled to the floor. The creature protested inaudibly, its translucent crystalline body threaded with blue fire, mind–venom warping the perception of everything within an arm's reach.

Matt groaned, his voice a deep rumble in his chest, and he struggled to pass from sleeplife to the now. Waking too swiftly from a glassdream was dangerous, could even be lethal. Kin–that–were had been known to lose their minds from such uncontrolled returnings. Matt had petitioned Father and First Father for many seasons before finally being allowed to glassdream unsupervised. The Fathers had discoursed long and hard on this matter. Glassdreaming was a necessary skill for his kin; necessary for him too if he were to continue First Father's line. A thing the Fathers did not always agree on. Matt was young and dreamers' lives (though cherished) were never entirely free from danger.

A truth never clearer than on this night.

Matt pushed the lightning bottle away. It rolled into a corner of the squarecave. Dreamlife diminished as the inverse proportion of distance from the infant *maahes'* mind–venom. Bellowed warnings filled the void in his head, and the now came crashing rudely in. Matt struggled to his feet, lurched from his squarecave. First Father barred his passage to the family cave. Matt protested but First Father pressed three hands to Matt's head, cupping his face, forcing him to silence. Or near–silence, anyway.

'Be the night, *jeju*. Be cold and invisible.'

Matt felt his chest knot with anger. 'How *dare* the Elders–'

'They do what is seen, as all must.'

'But Father is–!'

'Taken to trial, yes. Vision and life. What is seen in the glassdream is a threat to the now, you know this. Our line is tolerated only, not loved with the three hearts. My son overspoke his seeing. Trial by stone will determine the worth of his dream.'

'But this is his fifth trial! One more sting will kill!'

First Father nodded. Matt felt the movement travel into his own body through the hands gripping his head.

'Then my son will be dust for the father dune and you will be dreamseer.'

'I won't do it! I'll take combat! Or the walk!'

First Father's grip on Matt's face grew hard enough to hurt.

'You will do *only* what is *seen.'*

'I will *not!'*

First Father did not answer.

Matt wrenched himself from First Father's grip, lurched back into his squarecave. The infant *maahes* waited, scarred glass and blue lightning, mind–venom barely

diminished, eager to feed.

Matt took the creature to his bedslab. The White Men waited in dreamlife but this night they were no strange comfort, and no escape from the now.

No escape at all.

For two days Matt remained in his squarecave, refusing to eat, to drink, to moot, to glassdream.

Outside in the world static built, the land shivered. Stormlight smashed down out of the sky, carving a sizzling path through the thin atmosphere, drilling deeply into the dunes and turning them to glass. Matt watched the lightning fall and felt his head–heart pound more quickly than it had ever done before, sending nourishing blood to his brain, a panic reaction which, though mild, was nonetheless disturbing. Somewhere out there in the deep dunes, beyond the shieldstone wall marking the limit of the tribal territory, the lightning was birthing monsters, things made of glass and greed, things harder to see and even harder to kill, monsters that, given the opportunity, would consume the living energy of his body in agonising moments, before leaving the lifeless husk to be eroded and consumed by the endless waves of the father dune.

Matt's mid–heart thudded in his chest, washing toxins from the bunched muscles of all six arms, talking, eating and fighting. Matt forced his breath to slow, filtering the fine sand particles from the air and swallowing them. The sand tasted bitter and highly charged as it always did during a storm but his body could use the energy and the sand itself, bitter or not, was always nourishing.

A hand fell upon his shoulder. Six opposable fingers gripped his shoulder, light as any dune breeze despite their shieldstone weight and inconceivable age.

*'jeju.'*

'First Father.'

'It is time to wear your father's face.'

'I know.'

And Matt did. The face lay to his side on a leather pad, blue and ochre both, pebbled skin ravaged by new venom scars. Matt would wear a new face into the old world and, if the father dune was kind, would live to return it to his father, with his honour and his life. If not... two lives would end, and the line of the First Father with them. Would Tribe even notice, Matt wondered? First Father's line was long and wise but deep–death was always; the dune–way from which no return was possible. Tribe would continue, even if Matt and all his kin–to–come did not.

Matt lifted the face of his father and First Father spat upon it, the moisture a precious gift. Matt spat too, the lighter and darker pigments smearing together as they ran around the inside of his father's face. Then, all three hearts thudding in a barely controlled rhythm of fear and exultation, Matt raised his father's face and glued it to his own.

He moved to the opening in the squarecave. Beyond the shieldstones father dune was moons–black and full of terrors. Soon Matt would walk those dunes, returning with one of those terrors.

He would do this or die, and his father with him.

Matt lifted his head, with its new face. Green–gold eyes undimmed by age transfixed him. First Father had prepared him as well as anyone could. Matt buckled on his weapon belt, snugged it tight across his chest and waist, then leaped down from the squarecave to the shallow dunes where his First Father's walker, Tjoaat, waited impatiently. Matt swung himself into the saddle. Tjoaat reared, as Matt knew he would, planting mid and hind legs stone–firm in the sand while beating the air with both sets of forelegs. His great, gnarled head twisted almost hard enough to wrench the reins from Matt's fist, while a deep–throated protest grumbled into the world from somewhere deep in his chest. Tjoaat was old but not stupid. He knew the difference between Matt and First Father.

First Father leaped down beside them, leaned his face into Tjoaat's neck and muttered something Matt couldn't hear. The walker calmed, but not before whacking First Father's head soundly with his own. Matt winced at the bone–jarring *thud* of impact but First Father seemed not to notice. He shook off the blow as if it had been delivered from nothing more massive than a gossamer dunefly.

'I had hoped to send you on your way with less prosaic wisdom.' First Father unhooked a woven bag from his belt and held it up. The pungent smell that rose from within was as familiar to Matt as it was disgusting. 'Tjoaat is wilful but he loves nothing more. Remember this and he might not eat *you.'*

Matt took the bag, hefted it thoughtfully, then hooked it to his saddle. First Father watched. A moment of silence hung between them, and the wind sang mournfully.

'Darkness and death wait for you in the deep dunes, *jeju*.'

'I will meet them. I will return not–*jeju*.'

'Wisdom and courage be your shield and sword.'

'I will return. Your son will live.'

'All my sons will live.'

There was, finally, nothing left to say. Without answering Matt spurred the walker into motion, guiding the animal towards the badly eroded but still towering rectangular blocks of the shieldstone wall, and the deep dunes beyond. Closer than ever, blue lightning

crashed through Matt's head, leaving him dazed and reeling, face crazed with glass cuts and every muscle bruised from the hammering his body had taken as the fighting giants had steamrollered over him.

Matt struggled for breath. When, finally, he regained his senses it was to find himself lying in a sticky lake of blood beside a torn off arm with the Moroccan chick and the big guy gazing down at him with twin expressions of concern. The Moroccan chick's face and T–shirt were splashed with blood, none of it, apparently, her own. The big guy seemed more or less unscathed.

No. Wait. Matt frowned.

Something was–

Oh. His face cleared. 'Not *jeju*,' He aimed one still–numb arm towards his saviour. 'Not any more. I'm–' Matt frowned. 'He's... here to prove his father's dreams of us are true.' Matt frowned. 'No, wait. Not *father.* They don't have– hang on. If the

*jeju* are– but hang on, they're not though are they...?' Matt finally trailed off, words being unable to express the *(blue it was intensely blue)* confusion coursing through his mind with the sucking intensity of a crosscurrent undertow. The power of *blue*, drawing him down, drowning him even as it filled his mind with life – a living memory – that was not his.

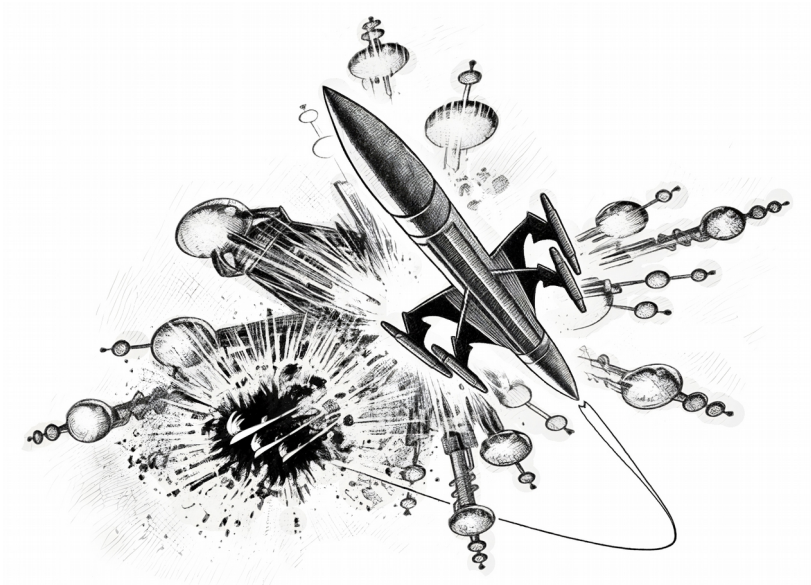
Matt finally gave up trying to articulate the *(blue it was)* crazy paving his mind had temporarily *(or not so temporarily? Now there was an unpleasant)* become.

The Moroccan chick's brow furrowed in thought as deeply as Matt's own was furrowed in confusion. Then she tilted her head sideways, offering a hand to pull Matt up from the lake of muck in which he was sitting. A moment later he stood beside her, dripping blue gore, breathing as hard as any marathon runner. He eyed the giant corpses scattered around them as she lifted one hand to the side of his face, gently pulled away a scrap of glass as intensely blue as any lapis lazuli. Matt winced as the glass came free.

The Moroccan chick held the scrap of glass up to the light. She looked from it to Matt and then to the big guy and finally back to the azure shard. She nodded thoughtfully, her lips dressed in the barest hint of a smile.

'A healer, a warrior, *and* a mystic...'

'Whatever,' Matt groaned. 'Just find me somewhere to sit down that's not bum–deep in body parts.'



**From the Account of Andrea Hansen**
**III**
**Escape Into Danger**

The Princess drove the red flyer so fast among the gantries and accumulators of the falling storm mine that the colossal bulk of inexorably descending superstructure passed the bubble cockpit in an eye–watering blur. Andy was almost thankful that she could not make out the innumerable iron–black protrusions, crackling with blue fire, any one of which could have pulverised the flyer had they collided with it. What was clear – frighteningly clear, to put a fine point on it – was that the three Green flyers herding them through the tumbling maze of metal and ceramic were not going to give up without a fight. The Green Men may not have secured the mine but they seemed to have no difficulty switching objectives – from ironglass, and all the free power they could ever store, to the Princess, whom they had clearly identified as a more readily achievable target now the critically damaged mine was falling to its doom. Even as Andy watched, face pressed to the curved blue glass cockpit bubble, the green flyers split up, circling one of the towering accumulators in different directions in order to try to cut them off. One actually managed to get ahead of them, and laid streamers of blue fire into the superstructure in their path.

Ibrahim pointed dumbly out of the cockpit as one of the huge accumulators ahead of them broke free from its moorings and began to fall, trailing great bolts of lightning which splashed uncontrolled through the falling mine, melting platforms and gantries to either side. Carter tapped the princess on one shoulder and muttered something Andy couldn't hear.

**'I SEE,'** the Princess rumbled back in a subvocal mutter loud enough to rattle the ribs in Andy's chest. She yanked and twisted the stick, driving the flyer in a series of gyrations which Andy was almost certain terrestrial ballistics had no name for.

Andy crossed her fingers and closed her eyes.

Blue flashes persisted for long seconds after the moment in which she fully expected to be vaporised.

Andy opened her eyes to find Ibrahim staring out of the cockpit, unable to take his eyes from the tumbling, crackling accumulator preceding them down through the black storm clouds towards the ground, barely visible through the murk, thousands of metres below.

The flyer shook. Blue fire splashed against the cockpit bubble. Andy squirmed sideways in her seat. The green flyers emerged from the tangle of superstructure, one trailing blue fire, descending upon them from three different vectors like birds of prey, a fully coordinated attack. Streamers of blue fire burst from the flyers' cannon, and sped towards them.

'They're firing!' Ibrahim gasped; somewhat redundantly, Andy thought.

'And we're not firing back why, remind me?'

Carter frowned at Andy's tone. 'Lifeboats don't have weapons,' he muttered. 'More's the pity.'

Andy was slammed against the top of the glass cockpit bubble as the Princess sent the flyer into what seemed like an uncontrolled dive. The Green flyers followed unhesitatingly. The damaged flyer couldn't match the manoeuvre, struck the trailing edges of a lightning attractor net and disintegrated into a hail of flaming trash. The other flyers bored on through the debris. The Princess glanced back over her shoulder, then rumbled something Andy recognised as an ancient family curse.

Carter sighed. 'I really didn't want to have to do this,' he muttered. To Andy he added, 'Anchor me.'

Without waiting for an answer Carter drew a glass pistol he'd acquired during the assault on the mine, then slid back the Red flyer's bubble canopy. Wind howled in; Andy's breath howled out. She grabbed for Carter's belt, hanging on for dear life as he leaned out of the cockpit, drew a bead on the nearest Green flyer and opened fire.

He was still firing, upside down now, as the Princess twisted the flyer to avoid a storm of energy lashing around the mine, when the lowest levels of superstructure, thousands of metres below the whirling flyer, slammed into the ground and the mine began to disintegrate around them.

Hunkered on her knees on the upside–down canopy, still hanging on to Carter's belt to stop him falling to his death, Andy found herself staring downwards, praying for the seething clouds of murk to hide the collapsing ruin of black metal and ice–blue lighting which shitty luck seemed to have picked out as the cause of their imminent demise.

As a kid Andy had been completely fascinated by wildlife shows, from which one of her overriding memories was of a huge cat – a leopard, if she remembered right – which had been filmed leaping from a tree branch onto an unsuspecting okapi. The shot had been in extreme slow motion; the play of muscle, the controlled collapse of

ligaments in the cat's limbs, the impact shock wave propagating like a slow tidal wave through belly and flanks of both animals at the point of impact indelibly etched on her mind. Something about the impact of the storm mine against the unyielding desert now reminded her of this. She had a momentary vision, as if from miles away, of the colossal structure smashing into the ground, multiple impact shock waves propagating through belly and flanks, just like the leopard. And just like the leopard, its claws – the hundreds of metres of ironglass gantries and crackling accumulators – sank into the ground, the desert dunes, crushing its attendant fleet of smelters in an azure fire storm which turned the desert to smoking fumaroles in a thousand different places.

The vision lasted only an instant, then she was back in the bubble cockpit of the red flyer, right–way up now, as Carter clawed the canopy closed against the howling slipstream, iron–drive shrieking past overload as the Princess drove the flyer at speeds approaching supersonic through the lethal maze of iron and fire around them. This part of their escape lasted perhaps two seconds – long enough for Andy to feel her heart thudding against her ribs in a long gulp of fear greater than any bar–fight, bungee jump or car crash could ever provoke; harder and colder than any terror brought by her previous adventures with Erimem; hard enough for the thought *–heart attack I'm having a–* to thread her mind with hot fire to match the cold blue eruptions cascading all around them. Then the thought was gone, shoved aside by an endorphin rush of relief as the flyer burst out of the debris field into clear air and hurtled away across the desert, leaving the storm mine to smash itself to oblivion against the desert floor in the charred distance behind them.

Andy sighed – but they weren't out of danger yet.

As Carter finally got the bubble canopy closed the howl of the wind and the suck of air from her lungs lessened. The sensations were replaced by something far stranger. She shook her head as claustrophobic vertigo filled her mind and blackness edged her vision. G–force? No, not that. What then? Beside her Ibrahim began to shake. His eyes rolled up until just the whites showed. Carter, face pressed to the canopy, was shouting something but his voice pulsed, colours she'd never smelled or tasted, hard and sharp enough to make her scream.

*'Maahes! We're flying over a nest! MAAHES!'*

The flyer tumbled as the Princess thrashed at the pilot station. Suddenly upside down again, squashed against the canopy, Andy saw the desert running with light, with blue lightning, shocks lancing out from the still–impacting storm mine. The flyer spun *–desertskydunerockcloud–* out of control. The dunes rippled, burst apart, grasping upwards like storm–smashed waves, vast clutching fists erupting from the world, to reach, to grasp and rend–

*'Maahes! Mmmmaaaaaaaaheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee*

Carter's voice was a whirling tunnel of yellowblack stomachchurn.

Sand cascaded from nothing – no, not nothing, *glass.* Lumpen, fractured glass, crazed and misted, shot through with blue lightning, refracting sky and ground; vast scorpion–shapes tens of metres across, multi–limbed, barely visible, twisting up from the dunes, azure fireshrieks howling the agony of their birth in lightning, temperatures

higher, for a heartbeat, than the surface of any sun.

Predators of glass and blue fire; and hunger, the overwhelming need to *consume.*

Living fulgarites, ripped from the shattered desert, given life by the energies loosed by the dying storm mine.

Maws of fractured glass ringed with blue fire gaped. Andy's limbs spasmed as the hunting fields disrupted the electrical activity in her brain.

The flyer hurtled across the erupting dune field, a red–silver dart tumbling from the sky to the sand, bouncing like a child's toy through the battlefield of glass eruptions, before striking a jagged spine of blue–black rock, flipping another thousand metres through the air and finally coming to rest upside–down in a long stand of springy desert scrub.

Ticking metal cooled, slowly.

The flyer's iron drive hummed and whirred, drive fields pushing and pulling erratically at the charged sand, a beacon to the lightning–glass monstrosities jacking their lumpen bodies out of the distant dunes.

Inside the flyer Andy stirred and groaned, her mind, dazed, oscillating–

Past–present–future: kaleidoscope memory–

Stressed glass and fractured

*red world: static; entrenched conurbation–*
*green world: nomadic; tribal community–*
*blue world: pellucid; fractal metropolis–*

hull plates groaned and creaked. The store–room listed alarmingly and from the decks above came the sound of thunderous

*gunfire, the tomb was suddenly full of–*
*sarcophagus was opening it was–*

shouting. One voice was

*blue it was–*

louder than the rest, and seemed to Andy to be bellowing commands. Were they being attacked? Or were they attacking some other hapless victim? She listened a bit more carefully, bracing herself between two stacks of crates tied down with rough–woven glass–fibre nets so as not to get bounced violently from wall to wall as the Green Corsair on which they were prisoners banked, climbing sharply through a number of jarring thermoclines, to attain height and therefore an advantage in whatever assault was to come..

***'Stand to!'***
***'Charge the batteries!'***
***'Stand by to send lines!'***

Andy shoved one of the crates aside and peered out through a jagged hole torn in

the hull. A moment later she was joined by the others. As she watched the deeply autumnal sunlight pouring in through the hole seemed to fade and a series of huge flashes lit up a violent witches brew of storm clouds. The lightning was followed by a long roll of thunder which rattled the deck beneath Andy's feet.

The Princess scrunched closer to Carter. **'Storm mine.'** Her voice was clearly meant to be a whisper. To Andy it sounded barely quieter than the thunder, from which her entire body still shook.

Carter nodded, concern lining his face. 'The cargo wasn't enough for them.'

**'Clearly.'**

A vast structure threaded with gantried lightning rods and towering blue–glass accumulators the size of gas refineries drifting, char–black and heavy, among the lightning fractured clouds suddenly filled Andy's mind.

'A ship this size can't take on a mine.' She frowned. 'They'd never get through the storm. Even if they did the mines all have military escorts, right?'

Her question turned heads. She noticed a strange glance from Ibrahim but dismissed it. Ibrahim had shot her a glance like that once before, shortly after they'd first met. It was a look Andy often found herself on the receiving end of, and it was always annoying. Heaven forbid anyone in service employment without a bucket full of qualifications should dare to posit an intelligent thought! Ibrahim had been different from the rest though. Andy hadn't even had time to trundle out the standard *Good Will Hunting* poke before the curator – whom she had come to learn was actually no slouch himself in the smarts department – performed an apologetic *volte–face* so abrupt she could not help but join in with the *kick–me–I'm–a–Muppet* grin which trailed disconsolately in its wake. After that it quickly became apparent that Ibrahim was a man who enjoyed – even required – his assumptions to be challenged. The look he sent her now was therefore highly significant but even so it took another moment and another thought – *Red Navy corvettes weren't ships you'd want to tangle with if there was an easier target, a dumped cargo, say* – before she realised why.

Her gaze dropped to the blue glass badge inscribed with an older Erimem's face, a slight weight still clutched firmly in her hand. Carter followed her glance, eyes narrowed with interest and the hint of a grin playing at the corners of his mouth. He held his hand out and Andy dropped the badge back into his open palm. Andy felt an odd moment of dislocation – a *sucking* sensation barely short of vampiric in effect – as she let go of the glass. In the moment of release, her skin tingled as if with static electricity and

*a city, sunlit but grimy–*
*a street bazaar, frenzied humanity–*
*watercolour paintings changing hands for money–*
*three ancient triangular hills looming on the dusty horizon–*

a sudden dizziness filled her head. The blue glass glittered in the lighting flashing through the broken hull and the dizziness and sucking sensation vanished as abruptly as they had arrived, driven aside by the overwhelmingly visceral *here–and–now.*

With an effort, Andy returned her attention to the present moment. Overhead, huge feet thundered on the deck–plates. Commands rumbled out. Commands, she suddenly realised, that she could *understand.*

Carter dropped the badge back into his pocket and buttoned it. He held Andy's gaze for a moment then returned his attention to the Princess. They began to speak again, this time in much lower voices.

Ibrahim moved up to take Carter's place beside her, near the breach in the hull.

'What else do you know that you almost certainly shouldn't?'

Andy shot him a glance. 'It's the badge.' *As if that image of Erimem wasn't weird enough.* 'The moment I touched it something...' she hesitated. 'Something *blue...* happened. I... no...' she let out a breath, fascination and frustration in equal measure. 'When they mentioned the storm mine I knew at once what it was. As if I remembered it, but from a long time ago. Like riding a bike. You think you forget but you never do. Like...' Andy flashed momentarily on one of Erimem's Fight Club lessons. '... I don't know... muscle memory for your mind...' She frowned. That wasn't quite it. '… for something you never did, or... haven't done yet, or... well, *something*, anyway.'

Ibrahim's face was a picture of fascination, despite her frustrating imprecision. 'Top of my to–do list, then.' He glanced towards Carter. 'Do you think he'd–'

Andy shook her head. The movement felt almost involuntary. Another memory – or just a rock solid guess? Outside the break in the Green corsair's hull the sky was darkening through shades of umber towards black and silver; a sudden, violent night.

'I don't think we'll have time.'

Up on deck, Andy somehow knew, preparations for the attack were well underway. Assault lines were rigged from the port and starboard lateral masts, glassguns charged, khopesh blades fused to razor sharpness. The ship's batteries crackled with energy, charged and racked at every one of the corsair's undamaged gun–ports. Something like a minor earthquake rumbled down through the decks, shaking the walls and rattling every storage barrel and crate in the room. The Green Men were *singing.* To her complete astonishment Andy found the words of the song poised on her lips.

***Tonight we spill blood boys,***
***For glory or death!***
***With fire in our faces,***
***And glass in our fists,***
***For iron! No mercy!***
***Our banner arises!***
***Tonight we spill blood,***
***To our last living breath!***
***So rise and draw blood boys,***
***To our last living breath!***

Andy glanced at Ibrahim, whose hands were jammed tight over his ears, for all the good *that* would do. 'Hold onto something,' she told him. 'As in, *right now.'*

No sooner had Andy uttered the words than the deck dropped out from under

them as the Corsair tacked, made full sail with a series of thunderous *cracks* and, with a *whoosh!* of displaced air, fell upon its prey.

There were three Green Corsairs and they dropped from the sky without warning, as vicious and merciless as any bird of prey. The Red Navy Corvettes rose to meet them, fighting for sky, for space to manoeuvre, guns charged, main batteries coming to bear on the attackers. Blue lightning splashed from ship to ship, broadside and narrow fire, burning hull and shrieking crew alike. The Red vessels were among the finest iron could build but the Corsairs had the advantage of surprise. The Red crews were well trained and well drilled – and died to a soul buying time for the mine to move deeper into the storm, attempting to hide in the thick black cloud. One by one the Red ships fell from the sky, masts shattered, sails and rigging shredded, plunging to the unforgiving desert. One of the Corsairs fell with them, masts gone, the hulls of the two vessels wound together in death, crews fighting to the last as they tumbled into the dark ocean of the storm. A second Corsair turned, decks running with fire, hull speared with Red gunners' lightning conductors, seeking clear air and relief from the gigawatt bolts falling on them from the towering clouds.

The remaining Corsair, one of her four mainmasts torn away, another smashed and trailing in rags, barely hesitated before plunging after the mine, deep into the heart of the storm. As Andy watched, face pressed to the hole in the hull, a dozen crew swung out along the broken mast and cut it free. With a huge sucking *crack* it was swallowed by the storm.

Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed around them, battering the hull. Thick black cloud closed around the ship, a dark and violent night. Up ahead the mine was running the storm. But a mine was no Corsair. It was not built for speed. The Corsair would catch up to it eventually. If the storm didn't consume it first.

'I can think of better times to be fiddling with your bling.'

Andy glanced sideways, jarred from her reverie, then turned away from the storm. Close beside her, Ibrahim jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. Andy followed his gesture. Carter and the Princess huddled beside the store–room door. The Princess seemed to be attempting to adjust the gemstones implanted into her chest, prising one of them loose and pressing it against the–

Andy grabbed Ibrahim and dragged him behind the shuddering wall of crates. Outside the ship thunder boomed. At the same time, the gem the Princess had fixed to the store–room door exploded with a sharp *thump*, barely audible over the thunder. There was a bright flash and the door was instantly reduced to shrapnel. Without a backward glance, Carter and the Princess ran from the room.

Ibrahim, peering over the netted tops of some barrels, muttered, 'On the other hand you could just abandon us to a fate worse than death.'

Andy grabbed his arm and pulled him upright. 'Come on Mr Quartermain. Now's our chance.'

'Our chance for *what?'* Ibrahim muttered.

'Fair question.' Andy shrugged. 'I expect you'll know when I do.'

She grabbed his arm and dragged him towards the door.

At that exact moment, Carter and the Princess barrelled back into the room, Carter trailing a stream of invective as vicious and abrasive as the Princess's explosive gems. Hard on their heels came three Green pirates, weapons raised. Torrents of blue flame from their glass guns tore through the door frame and bulkhead. Khopesh whirled in dazzling arcs, batting aside a hail of shrapnel, slicing glass nets and shredding storage boxes and barrels, spilling their contents across the floor. Andy and Ibrahim barely had time to change direction before the pirates were on them. A huge curved blade swung down towards Andy's head. She grabbed something hard from nearby and raised her arms instinctively. There was a painful thump, and she was driven downwards. But the blade which hit whatever it was she'd grabbed broke clean in two, the pieces whirling away into the shadowy recesses of the store–room, causing untold mayhem among the steerage. The pirates showed no sign of stopping, even of slowing, even when the Princess blew the left arms off one with what seemed to be the last of her concealed explosives. Andy had to give them this: they were brave. Or maybe just stupid. It didn't matter. She had no doubt that the lightning bolts from the glass guns would vaporise her just as effectively as they did anything else they touched. She retreated, scrambling backwards, dragging Ibrahim with her. A moment later she found herself pressed against the curved bulkhead beside Carter and the Princess at the business end of an entirely unreasonable number of long-barrelled blue-glass pistols.

The Princess dived aside as the guns fired. Carter and Andy followed suit, falling in opposite directions, with Andy pushing Ibrahim in front of her. Blue fire splashed across the hull, shredding it. Andy stared from the guns to the shredded hull and back. The guns swung to cover them – and at that exact moment the hull burst open as a thick iron javelin smashed in from outside, passing between Andy and Carter and impaling the pirates, passing completely through their chests and pinning them, as large as they were, like butterflies against the inner bulkhead. Dank cloud and stinking fumes made her choke as the storm pushed into the storeroom through the gaping hole ripped hull. On the other side of the hull thunder boomed and lightning flashed. The javelin blazed. Andy realised she was seeing up close one of the conductor spears fired from the storm mine.

Lightning burst around them in dazzling streamers. There was no way to escape it. They were–

**'OUT! OUT NOW!'**

The Princess' command was, unbelievably, louder than the thunder. As Andy watched she ran ahead of the lightning to the breach in the hull and leaped clear through the hole made by the javelin. Andy had a momentary glimpse of her huge form strobing as the lightning flashed, then she was gone. A split second later Carter followed hard on her heels, and this time Andy saw that he'd snagged one of the dozens of boarding lines snaking out from the Corsair and webbing it to the mine. Somewhere behind her something exploded. Acrid smoke and blue fire. Andy wasted no more time. She simply grabbed Ibrahim and pushed him through the hole, leaping after him with one hand locked on his belt and the other reaching desperately for a boarding line. Her grasping fingers touched a line, slipped, found another. Her fist

closed convulsively around the line. With Ibrahim a dead weight dragging painfully at her other arm, Andy fell away into the bruise–coloured sky.

The storm raged around her. Thick cloud twisted and churned. Ahead, glimpses of lightning–shot glass towers, iron–black superstructure. Behind, the Corsair, hull rent, gushing blue flame from its belly, a pincushion of incoming fire. Andy hung onto the boarding rope for dear life, every muscle in her body groaning a bitter protest. Ibrahim continued to be a dead weight, unprotesting, muscles rigid with fear. Andy had a moment to be thankful for two things: that he was such a dapper fellow, and that she had kept up the pilates. Then a vicious shock jolted her entire body as the line, battered by high winds, struck a web of other lines and tangled, and she was jerked to a halt.

Andy hung one–handed from the line, a shocked curse on her lips, her entire body humming like a high tension wire. She tried to shout to Ibrahim, to get him to swing himself up to the line. The storm ate her words, sucked them away and made them nothing. The muscles in her arm and back felt like they were on the verge of tearing apart. Andy knew she would fall, and soon, if she didn't do *something.* With this in mind she made a desperate heave and this time Ibrahim got the message, reaching up to grab the nearest boarding line. The relief when the pain of supporting his weight finally ceased beat every exercise–related endorphin rush she'd ever experienced, rolled into one.

She hung on tight to the line, focused on simply drawing breath. Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. She only became aware of the blackness edging her vision when it began to fade back to the more familiar darkness of the storm. She sucked in a deep breath and wrapped her legs around the line, easing the pain in her arms still further. Then she looked around.

A tangled web of boarding lines hung vibrating in the darkness to either side, battered by vicious gusts of wind. Dimly Andy was aware of figures swarming along them. Green, multi–limbed, hugely muscled. The pirates were nothing if not dedicated to their promise of violence. Looming ahead in the murk was their target: the colossal bulk of the storm mine, its towers and accumulators outlined by dazzling bolts of lightning.

Something tugged at her hair. Ibrahim, above and to one side, trying to get her attention. She turned. Swinging towards them was a Green pirate. He was moving fast, hand over hand, two khopesh held at the ready, two arms free for hand–to–hand combat. Lightning flared. The pirate was closer now, jaws opened wide in a vicious grin. One of his tusks was broken, she saw with shocked clarity, the edges looking raw, even burned. There were more burns along the cliff–like edges of his face and chest. Struck by lightning? And still *alive?* Huge eyes fixed on Andy's. The burned grin expanded further. Strong as she seemed to be here, Andy knew she would stand no chance against any two of those arms, not while she was hanging onto the line with no way of defending herself. She risked a glance down. There were lines swinging under her, battered by the storm, a tangled web which vanished into purple–black cloud. There was no time to think. The pirate was too close, muscles

bunching, khopesh swinging in long, vicious arcs, the burned grin wider than ever.

Andy let go of the line.

Her stomach lurched. She fell. She screamed, her voice lost in the storm. The glass blades passed over her head, slicing through the tangle of lines from which she'd been hanging. She had a momentary upside–down glimpse of Ibrahim, swinging away into the cloud, then her body struck a new line and she wrapped herself around it, praying it would hold. She looked up. Above her the pirate scowled, slicing even more viciously at the snarled web. Andy's line came suddenly free and she was falling again. The storm whipped another line against her and she grasped it desperately. Above her the pirate had let go his own line and was swinging down through the cats cradle towards her, a barely controlled, super–rapid fall. He'd judged the drop perfectly. In another moment the back–swing of Andy's line would carry them together. She couldn't let go – there was nothing under her to catch hold of; the lines were all above her now. Andy stared. The pirate's huge eyes were fixed on hers. Lightning turned them into blazing lamps. Blue fire crackled from the glass blades, perfectly illuminating the gaping, broken–tusked jaws, the lightning burned grin. Andy swore. For a split second she wondered if she was strong enough to survive a fall to the ground. It didn't seem likely, even in the reduced Maahosian gravity. The first of two blades slashed towards her. She flinched, unable to raise even one arm to defend herself. Lightning slashed around them, a blazing arc. The air was rent by a terrifying shriek – and the pirate was gone, vaporised by a splash of blue fire so close and bright it tore a scream from Andy's lips.

The flash faded from her eyes slowly.

She blinked.

*Who says lightning never strikes twice?*

Andy laughed suddenly, an explosive and completely uncontrollable release of tension. Shocked, she choked back sound and feeling. There was only one place to go now. Only one place she might find safety. It moved overhead, wreathed in lightning, its colossal mass barely glimpsed through the storm. Gathering her wits, Andy hoisted herself up into the tangle of lines and began to climb towards the mine.

Before she could scale more than half the height she needed to reach safety – or relative safety anyway, she supposed, depending on the number of surviving pirates – the web of lines around her began to shake, first humming like kite strings in a strong wind, then shaking madly in random directions. Something had happened – something major. But what? Intense flashes of light gave her an answer. As devastating as the attack by the Corsair must have been the return fire from the mine had taken its toll as well. Wreathed in blue fire, sails in ribbons, the Corsair was falling away through layers of viscous cloud, stretching the boarding lines webbing it to its much larger prey, snapping them, sending the pirates swarming ever faster towards the mine, now their only hope of escaping death. Andy climbed too, as fast as she could through the tangled web of crazily jostling lines, fighting for every metre of height, sometimes only an arm's length ahead of a snapped line, sucking in lungfuls of cold, acrid air, her chest burning with every breath and the muscles in her arms and back straining to what seemed like the very limit of human endurance.

It was a supreme effort – but it wasn't enough. She wasn't going to make it. She leaped as a line snapped, grabbed for a new hand hold, missed, fell, grabbed again, caught this time, pulled herself upwards, fell again as the line went slack. She swore. Somewhere up there the crew of the mine must be cutting the lines. Sensible enough – but lethal if she couldn't reach the mine before the lines fell free. The weight of the slowly falling Corsair was not helping either. Andy groaned. She wasn't going to make it. She definitely wasn't going to–

Movement: colossal movement, overhead. A dark mass edged with blue fire, descending towards her. The mine? No – she'd be descending with it. What then? Some kind of platform, a dark rectangle, backlit by lighting. A maintenance platform? There was a figure leaning out from the side. Andy squinted against the howling wind. Was that–?

*'Jump, Andy! JUMP!'*

Ibrahim's voice was a thin screech in the drumming thunder of the storm. Andy wasted no time asking herself stupid questions. With the last of her strength she jumped for the line tied to the platform rail, grabbed it, wrapped her legs around it, found herself rocketing upwards as the cats cradle of boarding lines at last fell free, carrying the remaining handful of shrieking pirates down through the storm towards the burning Corsair, slowly vanishing into the whirlpool of black cloud.

Turning her gaze upward, Andy stared with some relief at the iron–black mass of superstructure emerging through the cloud above them.

*'Don't count your chickens,'* Ibrahim shouted above the wind. *'The pirates didn't get what they wanted but the mine's a goner.'*

Andy felt barely a grace note of surprise. She knew this already, sensed it immediately she was within range of the mine's iron–drive. The normally smooth, magnetically controlled shelving away of gravity around the mine was now a jagged, arrhythmic pounding. Ibrahim was right. One of Ferrohelios' greatest assets was mortally wounded, falling to its doom. Even as the thought filled her mind, the superstructure above began to tilt, a slow but inevitable death roll.

*'What about the others?'* She screeched over the wind. *'Carter and the Princess?'*

*'They tried to save the mine, to hide it in the storm. By then it was too badly damaged. The rest of the miners got off in the lifeboats. I managed to get Howard and the Princess to wait for you.'*

The obsessive self–interest demonstrated by both was still fresh in Andy's mind. *'Do I want to know how you pulled that off?'* She bawled, impressed.

*'Let's just say it took a little more than appealing to their better natures,'* Ibrahim howled back.

*'Where are they then?'* Andy eyed the iron–black gantries, crackling with blue discharges, spearing down from the clouds on all sides. *'Hope it's not too far away!'*

Ibrahim scanned the shifting maze of iron around them and then pointed.

Andy followed his gesture. A red–bronze flyer adorned with a silver sun emblem on its flanks manoeuvred deftly through the shifting maze of superstructure. In moments it was alongside. A hatch slid open in the glass bubble running along the flyer's spine. From within, Carter waved one arm in a beckoning gesture. Ibrahim

stepped onto the flyer's broad wing and scrambled aboard, Andy wasted no time in following, casting a single interested glance at the spherical bulge in the spear's midsection, the smoothly pulsing waves of its iron–drive sculpting local gravity in a somehow satisfying curve.

Something banged violently against the flyer, rocking it. Andy reached wildly for the nearest support. Carter grabbed her and yanked her into the cabin, now canted at a savage angle as the gantry scraped down one flank. He slid the glass hatch shut, cutting off the sound of the storm.

'I've got them! Go!'

Carter's voice was a vaguely irritated rumble. Something told Andy he wasn't so keen on having them around. She looked forward. The Princess was seated at the flyer's controls. She pushed on the stick and the flyer's nose tipped down at a dizzying angle. Andy tumbled to one side, crashed against the cockpit. Face pressed against the blue–tinged glass, she had a moment to consider the immeasurable tonnage of superstructure falling around them, an ever shifting three dimensional maze, any part of which could smash the flyer and send them tumbling to their deaths. Then something moved against the iron–black mass. Something small and fast, and green.

*Three* somethings.

'We've got company,' she muttered, pushing herself away from the glass.

She repeated the warning more forcefully when it seemed apparent that neither of her rescuers had paid any attention. 'Hey! Company! They look like they mean business!'

Carter turned at her shout, glanced past her at the rapidly approaching green flyers, then turned back to the Princess. 'The Green men have recognised you.'

The Princess uttered a curse loud enough to rattle Andy's eardrums. **'THEY SHOULD HAVE SETTLED FOR IRON,'** she rumbled with grim humour.

Andy grabbed the hatch coming and hung on for dear life as the Princess drove the flyer sideways, faster and deeper into the lethal maze of superstructure around the falling mine as, together, they tumbled inexorably from

the sky spun
*(around Andy's)*
smoke and flame and
*(head. She blinked. Opened)*

her eyes. The bubble canopy was smashed, the flyer laid open to the sky and dunes. She squirmed around, spitting sharp, bitter sand. Ibrahim's face tumbled into view with the sky and the dunes. His eyes were wide, showing only the whites. He hung upside down, slung across an equipment rack like an old hammock. Spittle hung in long threads from his mouth and blood caked his face. Somewhere behind him, ancient ruins thrust broken shards towards the roiling sky.

Eeeee–

She tried again.

Eeeeebbbra–

Her voice was a sick churning sensation in her chest, yellowblack, slowly turning clear.

'Eeeeeeeb–rrrraaaaaaaaaaa–heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee–'

*'Ibrahim!'*

Her voice was her voice again, jagged spikes in her bloody ears.

Ibrahim jerked. He thrashed and drooled, eyes and mouth gaping.

Something about those wildly staring eyes, gone somewhere very far away, propelled Andy past the point of reason. A sound started up in her chest, a primal scream she could no more control than stop the moons in their orbits. Some limiting force in her body simply cut loose then. Her muscles strained and tore but she felt nothing. She was completely numb, the world tunnelling away into a blood–blue murk. No fear. No panic. No feeling at all. Every sensation draining away leaving only a cold, wooden numbness, of the kind afflicting those survivors who have successfully crawled from a wrecked vehicle minus a limb and never noticed its loss.

Andy began to struggle against the trashed flyer, the crushed hull and airframe pinning her in place. Blood slid from cuts along her arms and from long rents running the length of her jeans from hip to knee. She began to work her way loose, lubricated by the blood coating her limbs. Still upside down, she inched closer to the outside world. In her fixed field of view, framed by the flyer's ruptured hull, the world reciprocated. Monsters of glass threaded with lightning jacked themselves clear of the dune field, shaking clouds of abrasive sand from their bodies, irregular limbs like lumpen pistons jerking clear of the ground, then slamming back into it with great booming thuds. Fear penetrated the bloody murk numbing her mind and body. These *maahes* were not juveniles such as those birthed by the crashing storm mine. They were adults. They sensed her presence, her living mind, and they were coming to feed on it.

All this Andy saw upside down, as if through a child's inverting glasses, the vision ballooned into wide–angle surreality by shock and loss of blood. Thus it was that the appearance of what seemed like a knight in armour riding an armoured warhorse, wielding a huge lance and charging the nearest lumbering monster came with so little surprise it barely registered as having any at all.

Andy blinked stupidly. Time lensed outwards, stretching the moment into a faintly glowing granular line. The knight was actually more like a beduin warrior, swathed in robes to shield him (her?) from the desert and the warhorse was more like a giant lizardy camel thing with four humps and eight legs depending from an articulated spine, but the lance was real; black iron tipped with blue glass, crackling with energy as if recently charged, and certainly the intention to attack could not be mistaken for anything else.

The figure charged the thundering *maahes* at full tilt. The lance slammed home. There was a flash of lightning and the monster reared, still in utter silence. All of its rage, fear, every response was directed without sound of any kind. Perhaps there was the barest whisper of a high tension hum from the skeletal lightning animating its body. The figure reined in his mount as irregular limbs the size of tree trunks

slammed into the ground either side of him. Together they whirled, recovered ground, then charged again. This time the lance slammed home into the *maahes* body. There was a flash like summer lightning and when the coloured blobs cleared from Andy's eyes the creature was lying in several pieces on the *(father)* dunes as the lightning which was its lifeblood drained out, earthing itself into the desert, fizzing and popping among the dun coloured dunes, fusing the abrasive particles of sand to a thin sheet of glass.

Still upside down, Andy struggled to free herself from confinement and then collapsed, exhausted on the sand. All thought of Matt, Ibrahim, Carter, the Princess had fled. She knew only the pain which was refilling her body in a catastrophic cascade.

The figure dismounted, moving closer, looming over her like a figure in a child's nightmare.

Andy tried to speak. The only sound to emerge from her chest was a ragged groan of pain.

Eventually the groan became a word.

'... whoooaaaaarrr...?'

The figure reached up to its face and peeled it away. No. That wasn't right. Not its face. It's hat. No. That wasn't right either... anyway, whatever it peeled away folded like cloth but gleamed like gold foil. Some kind of metallic cloth. Particles of sand seemed to be hovering around it. Static electricity? Magnetism? The figure whipped aside the burka with a flair for the dramatic Andy would only later recognise as uniquely human.

'Miss Hansen. How badly are you injured? Can you move? We must retrieve your friends, and quickly. *Maahes* are pack hunters. More will come.'

It was true. Andy pulled focus on the nearby horizon, past the ruins to the slope of a long dune topped with a vicious spine of blue–black rock – presumably the same rock which had gutted the flyer as it hurtled out of control to its current crash site – where the sand was heaving upwards, streaming like brackish water from the bodies of a dozen more *maahes,* an entire pack.

'...you?' Andy finally managed, struggling to turn right side up. 'How – know my – name?'

The figure reached down to Andy, grabbed her forearm and tugged her painfully upright.

'My name is Burroughs. Edgar to my friends. I failed to save your brother, and therefore remain bound under obligation to complete the task he had set himself. To find you. The rest can wait.'

Andy shuddered. The world was sliding away again. The ground drummed to the beat of predator fulgarite. The figure dragged the metallic coverings back across his head, then wrenched a handful of the metallic cloth from inside his robes and frantically began to wrap Andy's

mind was a seething vortex as the *maahes* hunting fields tore perception
expanded, sucking in desert and sky, the world itself–

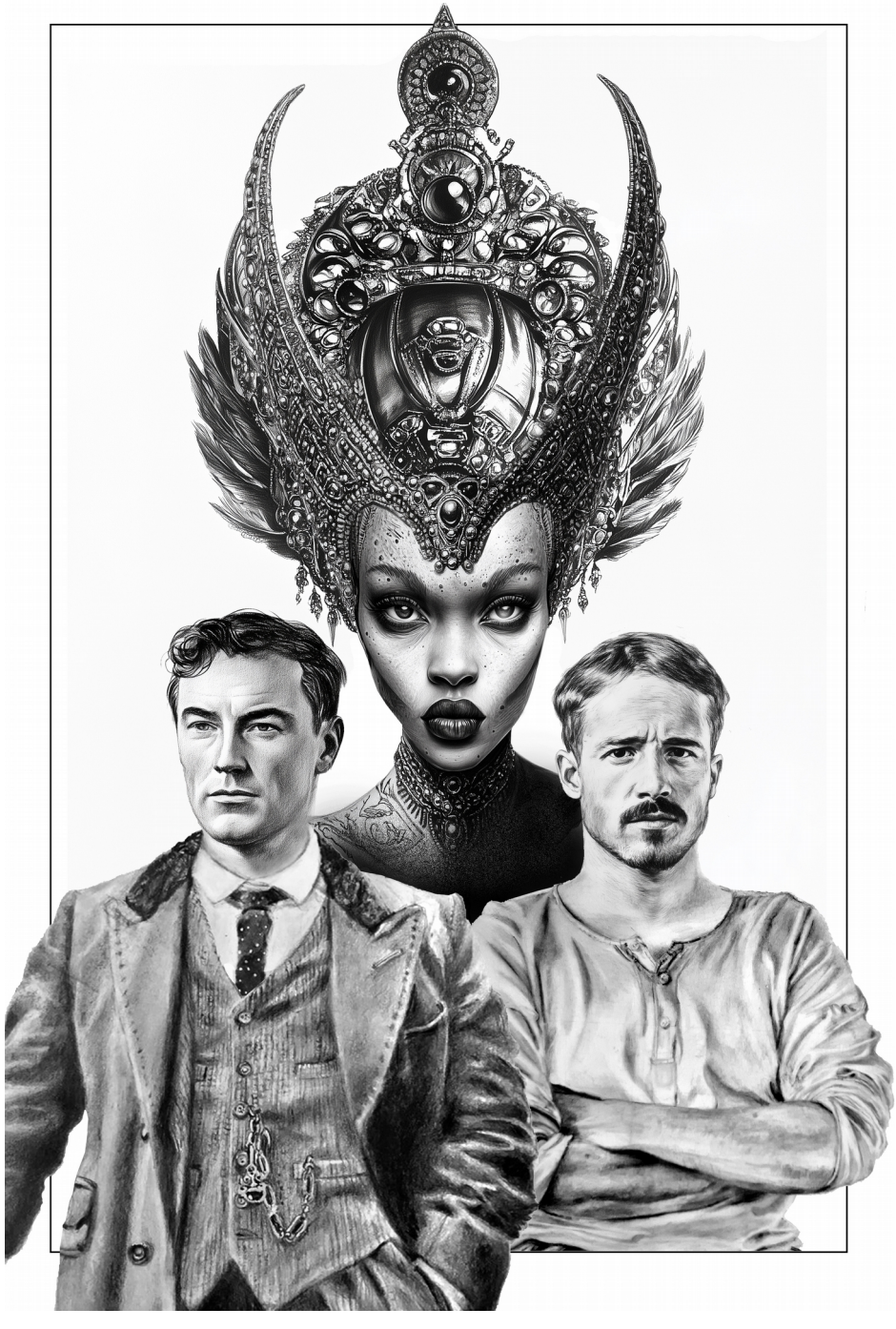
time and space and life and love and memory–

*Arizona, Sussex; London, Egypt; Earth, Maahes–*
*Matt, Ibrahim, Carter, Djora–*

Everything was *glass.*

*Blue glass.*

*And*



# INTERLUDE
# NOMADS OF MAAHES

**From the Account of the Dead**
**I**
**A Prism of Spirit (I)**

*High in a tower on an island in the Sea of Glass, in the City of the Dead, there lay sealed tombs, twin sarcophagi made from blue glass, and each held a White Man. The White Men were dead - murdered because of the threat they posed to the world they had invaded - but their threat had not ended with their deaths. The White Men had been human, mortal and physical. Now they were more, spirits cut loose from history and maps, from law and consequence. Severed from life they travelled wherever and whenever the currents of memory carried them, and nothing of history, truth or lie, past or future, Green or Yellow, Red or Blue, was hidden from them.*

*They were boundless. They were eternal.*

*They were finite. They were ephemeral.*

*They were Nomads.*

**From the Account of Edgar Rice Burroughs**
**I**
**My Sojourn In the Valley of the Kings**

My early education in Greek and Latin, in addition to English Composition, and my later studies and further research in classical literature and mythology having lead me to believe that a cure for my weakened heart (the reason for my medical discharge from the Confederate Army) might be found in the esoteric medicine of more exotic lands, I set out into the world by horse and ship, lured by a horizon that seemed ever to recede before me, that carried me from home and hearth, at a speed which at first I found deeply distressing.

Being a man who has often ruminated on the need for adventure and further, having survived the Chicago influenza epidemic of 1891 and having met and even befriended both thieves and murderers while herding cattle on my brothers' ranch in Idaho, can confirm that a certain measure of speculative undertaking is necessary both to the strengthening of character and the maturing of the human spirit. Notwithstanding there have been many moments during my journey when false hope and failure led me to within a heartbeat of reversing my course and returning home.

Yet these moments, as much as I yearned to indulge them, always passed unrealised. And so I continued on my journey through the remote corners of the world, Africa and India, and across the remote plateaux of Tibet to China, arriving after many months and more adventures, in the land of the great Kings of Antiquity, where rumours of an ancient find among the sterile deserts of an ancient kingdom

might yield the medicinal miracle I sought. And thus I came to seek a guide to lead me deep into the desert, to the fabled Valley of the Kings.

This being the place in which I died – in a manner of speaking – for the first time.

My arrival in Egypt may have been been precipitated by a preoccupation with the future but gazing upon the Nile provoked an altogether opposite view. The Amazon may be the greatest river in the world but waters of the Nile are beyond any doubt those which nurtured the cradle of civilisation. This mighty river is indeed the river of life, for it was here that Alexander and Ptolemy shaped the future of the modern mind, here that the defining monuments to human vision endure to this day. Cairo may be a filthy city infested with beggars and feral cats and without a decent boarding house to its name, but the sight of the Great Pyramids drives all thought of poverty and privation from the mind, leaving only a sense of wonder sufficient that mere words will never be able to convey the depths of its impact. I can see them from the streets, man–made hills rising above the humble dwellings of the city, and never has history seemed closer. I cannot keep from my mind the vision of Egypt's most famous wonders as they must once have been, dressed in dazzling limestone and capped with gold. How they must have shone in the sun, bright enough to be the incandescent signpost to heaven the Pharaohs held them to be. For five hundred generations they have endured, besting time and war while the lives of their builders fell into obscurity. Now all all that remains of the lives which bequeathed to us their enduring mystery are dusty remains in tombs lost forever to the shifting desert sands, a long shadow thrown by the past, only partially dispelled by museum lights.

Following my arrival in Cairo I took up lodgings in the least disreputable establishment I could easily locate, and immediately set about securing the services of a guide. My first stop was the Museum of Antiquity, an impressive establishment whose collection, though it held no surprises, was decent enough to the casual onlooker. I wasted no time on the trinkets history had allowed to trickle through its greedy fingers, but instead sought the man with whom I had been conversing via telegram for some months, the Museum Curator, Professor Asim Nassor, of the Cairo University.

The Professor greeted me on arrival with profuse pleasure and a smile which brooked no argument. I already knew him to be a man of learning but I now saw that he was a man additionally gifted with effuse good cheer. His clothes were clean and well pressed, his handclasp was firm and dry, and his eyes twinkled like those of a child at Christmas. When he invited me to tour the collection, his voice was soft but carried no less for it. Thus we passed a pleasant hour with history as our companion, after which we took lunch under hand–made awnings before a small establishment which casual visitors to the city would never have found, wherein I raised the subject which had been the reason for my visit.

The Professor offered little by way of comment as I spoke but waited patiently for me to finish whereupon he studied me thoughtfully. I could sense the working of a powerful mind behind a gaze which now seemed far less childlike than acquisitive. Waving aside the overly solicitous owner's offer of more food, more tea or more

hashish, he placed his forearms on the table between us and commenced rubbing the pads of his middle fingers and thumbs together in a cogitative manner. Though his face remained in shadow narrow bars of dusty sunlight lay across the cream linen of his suit, from where it reflected dazzlingly into my eyes, deepening the shadows cast by the awnings on his finely sculpted features. A long moment passed in this way and not without some tension, for in the moment of contemplation the sounds and smells of the street beyond our table seemed to rise up in a manner both oppressive and threatening.

'A man of learning must know certain things by which to maintain his position and responsibilities,' the Professor said at length. 'Certain people too.'

For some reason the momentary shadow that passed across the Professor's face seemed to me a disquieting reminder of his past. I am not normally a man given to believe or act upon hunches but his expression, though it passed rapidly, left me with a sudden concern that my service revolver and ammunition were located back at my lodgings in a concealed pocket of my unpacked travel bag.

Not so my wallet, however, which I now opened to extract a payment for our meal.

My tension drained only slightly, when the Professor leaned forward so just the tip of his nose and short beard emerged into sunlight.

'The thing you seek may not exist. If it does then it will be in the deep desert. But be warned. Shadows fall often upon those who seek to avoid their fate.'

I inclined my head in acknowledgement. 'Of this I grow more acutely aware every passing day.'

The Professor seemed finally to achieve the decision he had been reaching for.

'Fate notwithstanding I believe we may be able to do business.'

The Valley of the Kings. A stupendous undertaking. A volume of desert valleys and rocky arroyos encompassing more than 3000 cubic yards, with many side pockets and additional gullies, contained within the Theban Necropolis. Five centuries of Egyptian tombs, more than twice the length of time Modern America has existed, and yet still it is but a tiny representation of the civilisation which thrived here, being a home for barely two dozen kings and their immediate families from the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties.

My destination was located more than two hundred and fifty miles from Cairo. To travel there by land would take several weeks and was likely to be hazardous (the principle dangers being the weather, lack of provisions and attack by desert bandits) therefore Professor Nassor arranged passage for me on a modest trade vessel plying its wares along the river. Nine days later we arrived at my destination, the city of Luxor, once known as Thebes, the Capital City of Upper Egypt, located on the East Bank of the Nile, opposite and within sight of the West Bank Necropolis. It had been arranged that my guide meet me in Luxor, which the Professor referred to as Heliopolis, the City of the Sun, where he would arrange the crossing to the West Bank, and travel thence to my destination.

The Professor's arrangements were carried out to the letter. Ten days after our

lunch in Cairo I found myself astride a camel as my guide, whose name was Arak and who spoke very little English, led the intensely inclement beast the last few miles of my journey into the head of the Valley of the Kings.

The Professor had provided a map detailing the location of the fifty or so tombs which had so far been excavated. I unfolded the map as we entered the valley, employing my compass to orient it with the land. The canyon walls unfolded before us, shallow and dusty, with no shred of the geological drama I had pictured since leaving Cairo. And yet there was something about them that was affecting, some hint of antiquity, a sense of history, of lives passed. The small number of rulers that were buried here; the larger number of their family; the number, larger still, of toiling slaves who had spent their lives building the tombs in which their masters would spend eternity following their deaths... these images settled densely upon me, growing heavier as we moved slowly forward.

Arak cast a look in my direction.

'You have map of tombs?'

I nodded.

'Tombs all gone now. Treasure all gone. Nothing here but dust and bones.' He shrugged. 'And jackal... he take bones.'

I folded the map. 'Arak, the treasure I seek is not made of gold.'

'Jewel then.'

'Or precious stones.'

'Then why you come here for?'

I smiled. 'You would not believe me if I told you.'

He nodded vigorously. 'Yes. You tell me. I listen hard.'

'This way.' I indicated a direction roughly south–west. The cliff walls rose a little in that direction. The sun stood high above the valley. Caves loomed in the canyon walls like watching eyes in shadowed sockets. 'You'll see.'

But Arak was destined never to see that which I sought. This sudden understanding was underscored by the single sharp crack of a rifle shot, which tore open the baking silence of the valley, rolling in drunken echoes from valley wall to valley wall. Beside me, Arak slumped forward on his camel, then slid slowly off to one side until he hung, upside down, hooked on by one leg tangled in his beast's harness. The beast itself, startled by the noise, bolted, and I was afforded no more than a glimpse of Arak's blood–soaked face as he was dragged past me and away.

All this flashed through my head in less than a second, certainly a far shorter time than it takes to relate, nor did I experience it in anything like so clear a manner as I have stated here. No sooner did I realise what had happened than I reached for my pistol, an action in which I was temporarily thwarted because my camel had also bolted in panic at the noise, which action undoubtedly saved my life, as the bullet intended for me impacted instead upon the ground where, though it may well have disrupted the quiet contemplation of some desert lizard, as far as I was concerned it delivered nothing more harmful than a stinging spray of gravel. By then my camel was in full flight and I was hanging on for dear life, with no other thought in my head than the diligent avoidance of losing my grip, falling, and without doubt breaking my neck.

Riding a camel is very different to riding a horse. With horses I am comfortable, having worked with them since my childhood, trained with them to the level of a circus rider in my youth and pursued Apaches on them in my adult years. Camels, on the other hand, are recalcitrant beasts at the best of times, with what barely three days experience had taught me was nothing less than a god–given antagonism towards, and distrust of, their human masters. The camel I had been provided with seemed to me to display even more than the usual distemper and violent complaint and, further, evinced a prominent tendency to emit strings of stinking spit–bubbles that would put the worst army latrine to shame, permanently contaminating anything and anyone unlucky enough to be in their path if the wind happened to be blowing in the wrong direction. I was nonetheless considerably aggrieved when my mount fell victim to the volley of shots which chased us as we fled. Uncouth as it was I could feel nothing but guilt over the beast's demise, not to mention that of my guide, poor Arak, whose only crime had been to take up employment with a fortune hunter such as myself.

I briefly considered using my fallen beast as cover while returning fire but common sense and a tactical instinct drilled into me through years of military training countered this thought. I had no idea who or where my assailants were, or how many of them there were, but to the best of my knowledge any number of rifles, even one, outmatched a man with only a pistol and his wits for defence, so I continued my flight on foot, scrambling desperately across rocks and scree, sometimes on all fours, seeking always to avoid the barrage of shots which followed me through the tortured landscape. And as the bullets ricocheted off the rocks to either side so too did frantic thoughts pursue similarly disrupted paths through my mind. Would I die here, a victim of nameless assailants, the latest unlucky victim to find rest in this ancient valley of death? Why was I being assaulted? Were the shooters desert bandits? Why did they kill my guide? Surely that would gain them nothing? If they wanted my money, which I assumed to be the case, why had they not attacked before now, ransomed me at gunpoint?

To none of these questions could I discern answers. Logic had apparently abandoned me, unable to contest the thickening cloud of fear clouding my wits, which fear was only compounded by a sharp pain in my chest that burned as intensely as any desert sun. For here was my worst nightmare: that I would die of heart failure due to my condition during the pursuit of its remediation.

In any event my mental exhaustion was easily equal to my physical exhaustion by the time I found slight refuge in the shadows beneath a huge limestone boulder which in the past had detached itself from the high cliff and come tumbling earthwards, where it had finally come to rest jammed against an overhanging ledge of rock. Realising I could transport myself no further I resolved to do the only thing I could to avoid death at the hands of my unknown assailants, which was to burrow desperately into the alluvium soil, which seemed to me chiefly composed of clay and calcium carbonate, or marl, as it was known by geologists, which was, around the base of the boulder, deep and soft enough to shovel by hand. Desperately I began to scoop a hollow into which I might slide my aching body and then attempt to cover it with the

loose deposit. It was a slender hope of survival but all I possessed, and I took full advantage of any head start my bolting camel had gained for me over my pursuers.

The boulder being part of a steep cliff face, I had no problem finding a crack to jam myself into, and immediately began to burrow into the earth. Even as I did this I could hear the sound of distant voices echoing from the rocks. Were these my pursuers? If so I could not understand them. My studies in Greek and Latin, and even my passing knowledge of Apache tribal language, hardly prepared me for the translation into English of Egyptian bandits hell bent on murdering me. So I ignored the voices and dug, ever more frantically, while trying to make as little noise as possible. By the time I could hear footfalls as well as voices, I had managed to burrow a trench big enough to lay flat in. I wasted no more time, but wriggled into the hole and began to scrape some of the loose detritus back over my body. At this moment a start horror took hold of me for, accustomed as I am to the wide open spaces of my homeland, I had not reckoned on a sudden attack of claustrophobia. But even this was topped by the unnameable terror I felt as the boulder above me which must have weighed several tens of tons, trembled, shuddered, and then shifted.

Was I now to be crushed before any heart failure or assassin's bullet could claim my life?

Hardly had my dazed mind framed the question than a shadow fell across my hiding place and I heard an exclamation of excitement and the sound of running feet, and rifles being cocked.

Then darkness closed over me, muffling the sound of shots, and I found myself propelled violently into the belly of the earth.

I do not know how long I fell, or how much time passed before my senses returned, but when they did it was to the sound of sharp instructions directed at me in an urgent, British accented whisper.

'Just who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing here of all places? Actually, never mind. Just keep your mouth shut – and stay quiet if you value your life!'

I finally opened my dirt–caked eyes to be greeted by the dim sight of a dishevelled young man wielding a badly maintained pistol, which by the smell of cordite had been recently fired.

The pistol was aimed directly at my face, under which circumstances it felt entirely reasonable to do exactly as had been requested of me, no more and no less. But my vow of silence was to no avail for, in another moment, I could hear echoing voices and the sound of several men moving without care through the underground passages in which I now found myself.

The dishevelled Englishman muttered a curse under his breath, then held out his hand to me. I grasped it without comment and was hoisted upright, where I proceeded to dust myself down while framing what I considered to be a number of brief but pertinent questions, only to be rudely interrupted by another sibilant whisper.

'The name is Carter, sir: Howard to my friends, among whom I do *not* count petty

officials or *tourists;* and I have the thoroughgoing misfortune be the man in charge of this excavation – or anyway I did until the small hours of this morning when these blasted fellows saw fit to–'

I interjected another question, which seemed to rouse my companion's ire even further.

'Tomb robbers? Of *course* they're ruddy tomb robbers! The itinerant buggers have been trying to kill me all night! Thanks to you they've found a way in. Now for the sake of all things holy be quiet before they hear us and *shoot* us!'

As annoyingly brusque as he was, I confess I could see no reason to argue with the Englishman's logic. But if I expected gratitude I was to be disappointed.

'Finally. Now look sharp or the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem won't be the only corpse in Tomb 41!'

And with this the Englishman grabbed my arm and dragged me away into the darkness.

**From the Account of Howard Carter**
**I**
**Exiled from the Earthly Realm**

In the house in which I had been born, my father, John Carter's, town house in Earl's Court, there had been a lovely garden with beautiful trees and, he being an artist of some renown, for the purposes of study, large pens for animals. I have only few memories of these pens but such as I have are as vividly realised as my father's many paintings, for the animals those pens contained were as wildly spectacular as any collection you may see in a museum or zoological establishment. None of these exotic creatures, however, could hold a candle to the sheerly *fantasmagorical* beings which, as the blue light suffusing my vision faded, I now witnessed brawling and howling before me across a desert landscape which, being presided over by two black–bronze, lumpen moons and a vast, umber monster of a sun, was clearly very far removed from the world containing both the urban landscape of my London birth and the rural wetlands of my Norfolk upbringing.

As dazed as I was, I was barely able to frame the thought that just moments before I had been standing within a cold, dry Egyptian tomb, a location as familiar to me as the house I had erected for myself at Elwat el–Diban, close to the Theban Necropolis at Luxor. Now I sprawled across a scrubby, dun–coloured stretch of desert seemingly overrun with the most violent and exotic creatures ever conjured into being by man or myth.

They were, in short, creatures born of some hashish or other intoxicant fuelled

nightmare; of some unearthly history, into which some inexpressibly alien god had breathed sweating, stamping, shrieking, stinking life.

And they were *upside down.*

No – wait.

Sprawled in the sharp, unfamiliar–smelling desert sand it was I who was inverted, not they.

I rolled over onto my belly and the scene righted itself immediately. Before me was a tableau no less fantastic than any Bosch or Breugel. My observational skills, for which Lord Carnarvon and others had paid so generously in the past, had seemingly taken their leave. I therefore noted, in no particular order, and in addition to the ugly moons and brutish sun, a tenuous raft of pinkish cloud thinner than even the scrub cloaking the harsh escarpment capped with razor sharp spines of rock which arched beneath it. Sprawled out across the dunes before the ridge were an uncountable number of... well, I want to say people... actually, I *will* say people, though they had the appearance of no people I had ever seen before. Animals did not fight with guns and swords in any history or mythology I had studied. Therefore the violent conflict before me was conducted by intelligent beings, and even the ones with six arms and viridian skin standing twice my height at the shoulder, were people, as evidenced by their behaviour.

The green people were fighting for their lives, that much was clear. Their enemies were barely shorter than they, tall and unnaturally thin, having only two arms but with elongated skulls adorned with cut glass or gems, and coloured a deep vermilion. Both groups fought ferociously, their voices raised in a deep and violent din, reminiscent to me of dangerous rock slides on ancient Egyptian hills.

These visions were strange enough, true, but they were overshadowed by the incongruous sight of several more familiar figures fleeing the melee, including at least a dozen of the tomb robbers who had so recently attacked who had so recently attacked my camp and pursued me into the rocky labyrinth surrounding Tomb 41 in the Valley of the Kings, together with an incredible vision of violence and loveliness which could only be the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem, that mysterious and elusive Eighteenth Dynasty "Lost" Pharaoh, so recently and impossibly returned to life from the lightning–shot enclosure of her own sarcophagus.

The tomb robbers were, unsurprisingly, running for their lives; the Pharaoh was not. Instead she was *fighting.* In her hands were two of the gun–like weapons carried by the green warriors. I say gun–like, for the weapons were apparently made of a material much like glass, firing not bullets but devastating beams of cobalt light, at whose touch everything from flesh to rock crackled with blue lighting, burst asunder and was gone, a fate which several of the fleeing tomb robbers and the giant warriors between whose legs they ran, mostly unnoticed, encountered.

I resolved to stay glued to the ground, previous adventures having demonstrated that discretion was often the better part of valour, hoping that the fighters would not notice me as I scanned the landscape for a more resilient bolt–hole in which to conceal myself long enough to work out what had happened and how I had come to be transported to this fantastic place. Spying a suitable ridge of rock whose

foundations were lost in deep umber shadows, I began at once to move – only to bump up against something soft and yielding – something which protested at the solid thump of my knee against its side. I risked a glance sideways. The protester was the American tourist whom I had encountered so recently in the Valley of the Kings. He too was sprawled upon the ground, groaning with pain and clutching at his chest.

'You!' I exclaimed, unable to keep the annoyance from my voice.

'Yes, me,' he returned, with no less vehemence.

He began to scramble to his feet but I grabbed him and yanked him back down to ground level, ignoring his further protest and entreating him to be silent. He complied but not quickly enough. The noise we had made had attracted the attention of some nearby fighters. One of the green giants stamped towards us, four of his six arms clutching curved glass swords, all of which were raised to strike. Had I not reacted as quickly as I did those gleaming, blood–edged scimitars would undoubtedly have sliced us into pieces and ended my story there and then. Fortunately, like one who has accidentally gripped a wire running with live current, the shock of transition had clamped my fist even more tightly upon my Webley & Scott Mars Automatic and now, without thinking, I raised, aimed, and fired at the charging giant.

The sharp *crack* of the pistol sounded unnaturally loud, and the recoil drove me a surprising distance back along the desert scrub.

I had a moment to register the astonishing sight of my bullet shattering one of my would–be assailant's razor sharp blades before passing completely through his hugely muscular chest and continuing in a perfectly straight line, trailing cobalt blood, until it disappeared over the distant horizon.

A look of slow surprise crept across the leviathan's face. With the expression fixed firmly in place, he crashed to the ground, his weapons scattered to the four winds. I could not tell if he were dead or merely incapacitated but he did not move.

Silence descended upon the battlefield. In the long moment during which the Green Man had fallen, something had changed. Then I realised what it was: the fighting had stopped. Everyone on the battlefield was looking at me. Or rather my *pistol.*

**'IRRRRRONNNNN!'**

A voice rumbled, in tones and volume sufficient to cause me to wince.

**'WHITE MAN HAAAAASSSSSS IRRRRONNNNNNNN!'**

And then every living thing I could see was running towards me, weapons raised.

There was only one thing I hated more than petty officialdom and that was tourists.

In the six years since the official inquiry following the Saqquara Affair my opinion of them had only ever retrogressed. They represented the worst kind of wealth: egotistical, immune to any sense of wonder and, in many cases, completely nihilistic; desiring only to leave their own mark on history no matter the cost. Indeed this had been the very crux of the issue at Saqquara, a tomb representing priceless antiquity, wherein wealthy French tourists granted leave to visit by the Egyptian government had in reality wanted nothing more than to scrawl graffiti over the tombs and thus ruin any attempt to preserve them for the edification of humanity as a whole.

No *respect.*

That was the problem.

That had *always* been the problem.

So I took the official line, supported the Egyptian guards in their admittedly overzealous ejection of the tourists, and the whole sorry mess me cost me my job. Not that I'd really enjoyed being Inspector of Antiquities. Too much paperwork, not enough archaeology. I'd come to Egypt to learn, to study the bones of history, to paint some flesh on them. Everything that followed had been a political *divertissement*. And now here was this American fellow, muttering inane questions when he'd been told to keep quiet, and who apparently had no clue how to act when finding himself under attack from one of the countless threats posed by the desert and those who inhabited it.

'Tomb robbers? Of *course* they're ruddy tomb robbers! The itinerant buggers have been trying to kill me all night!' My tone was cutting, and deliberately so. 'Now for the sake of all things holy be quiet before they hear us and *shoot* us!'

For a wonder, the tourist did as he was told. And not before time. Wasting no more time on niceties I led him through the dark tunnels, deeper into the hillside.

'Move slow, and step where I step,' I told him in a cold whisper. 'These tombs are full of shafts. Take a tumble down one of them and it's a broken leg at the end of the fall.'

The tourist said nothing. He simply hung back enough for me to take the lead again, turning the wick on my lamp down as far as it would go, testing the ground, and stopping every few yards to listen for sounds of pursuit, which for another wonder, actually seemed to be receding.

The dark gathered slowly around us. The air was dry and thick with dust which sucked away moisture from the skin and stung where it lined the throat. The ancient hills seemed to breathe, a chill, dark, zephyr of breath, expelled as if from the lungs of some sleeping giant. I tightened a strip of cloth I used as a bandanna across my nose and mouth. The tourist had no such protection but there was nothing I could do about that – or any other deficiency. I moved slowly forward, picturing the maze of tunnels as we moved. The map in my head would not be especially effective. The tomb we were in had been discovered only recently, and was largely unexplored, part of a labyrinth of tunnels and chambers tucked into what had previously been thought to be solid rock adjacent to Tomb 41, which fellow archaeologist M. Junius Scarman, a man of enormous drive sporting motives as questionable as his Roman namesake, believed to be the tomb of the Eighteenth Dynasty Pharaoh Hatsepshut. Scarman was yet to be proved right or wrong on that count but, if rumours were to be believed, he'd apparently wasted no time 'acquiring' artefacts for sale to overseas collectors – trade he seemed to have no qualms at all about conducting without a licence from the Egyptian Authorities. If I had still been Inspector of Antiquities I would certainly have had something to say about this – something to *do* about it too. But all that was in the past.

Or perhaps not.

After all the robbers who'd attacked my camp could be working for anyone,

including – and this was beginning to seem ever more likely given their relentless ruthlessness – Scarman himself.

I put Scarman out of my mind. There would be time for a reckoning with that unworthy gentleman later – if indeed he was responsible for our predicament – and *if* we survived this present encounter. Moving silently through the tunnels, I finally found what I sought – a wide, flat wall covered with hieroglyphs – a once beautifully rendered history of the life of the ruler who had been buried in this tomb, long forgotten by all but time, now crumbling slowly to dust in the ancient darkness of the earth. Somewhere in the darkness I could hear the sound of pursuit. Was it getting louder? I ran my hands over the wall, briefly wishing I could have had the opportunity to render the scenes depicted here in watercolour on good quality stretched paper, knowing it would never be so, and that were we to stand a chance of escaping with our lives this monument to history must be, at least partially, ruined.

Thrusting my lamp close to the wall I began to examine the rendering. In moments I found what I had sought – an artfully concealed seam, indication that the decorations had been used to camouflage a covert entrance. I had encountered many of these in previous excavations, though none with seals intact, all having been desecrated over the last several thousand years by tomb robbers searching for gold and other treasure. I felt a surge of anger when I realised that this entrance was still intact. An intact tomb! And I, once the protector of Egyptian antiquity, was now destined to be its desecrator, no better than any tomb–robber throughout history, up to and including the brainless thugs currently trying to murder us.

Earlier that evening I had managed to grab my tool belt before fleeing the camp. Now I extracted from it a short pry–bar – a lever used primarily for loosening soil or shifting blocks of stone long centuries had wedged obstinately into place to block my path. I had a more destructive use for it in mind now.

Choosing my place with care, I placed the pry–bar against the wall and *shoved.*

To my enormous surprise, instead of making the start of a hole in the wall through which we might scramble to escape out pursuers, my efforts had an altogether different effect.

In absolute silence, a small section of the wall swung open, as if on a very well maintained pivot. Revealed was a dark gap a few inches wide, from which a gust of dry, cold air emerged.

The tourist made a small noise of surprise.

Wasting no time berating him, I took back my lamp and shoved the fellow through the gap. I followed him through, stopping only to push the section of wall which formed the door to this new chamber shut behind us. This done I turned up the lamp. The sight which greeted us was beyond my wildest expectations. For a moment my fear of death was driven aside as thoroughly and completely as any loose scree by a team of well–paid excavators. In the lamp–light the chamber, which was large and spacious, gleamed as if it had been lined with gold. As well it might. The entire space was in fact walled with shelves on which were arranged a staggering number of undoubtedly priceless artefacts. Statues, jewellery, adornments and weapons of all kinds. There were urns and jugs and boxes, stack upon stack, receding

into the flickering gold–shot dimness of the chamber. There was not a speck of dust, dirt or grime in sight, no tarnish was in evidence, no decay or rot evident in the gilt shelves. I gaped in astonishment, not just at the immense wealth gathered here but also at its pristine condition. I could not see even a single cobweb, definitive evidence of how efficiently the chamber had been sealed, all those thousands of years ago.

On a raised plinth at the far end of the chamber there lay a large block of alabaster – the Pharaoh's tomb itself – her final resting place.

The tourist stood beside me, and I could sense the surprise and wonder running through him, for it was clearly a match to my own. For years I had been searching for an intact tomb – the holy grail sought by every Egyptologist down the years. And now to find one! And under such absurdly life–threatening circumstances!

I moved into the chamber and was immediately struck by something unusual. Three tunnels opened out from the chamber. No attempt had been made to conceal them. This was most unusual, dynastic Egyptian priests and architects being the devious minded souls they almost always were. But it proved one thing. This was not the resting place of any minor functionary or family member. This was a dynastic royal tomb. And if the inscription within the hieroglyphs on the concealing wall was any indication then my initial supposition was correct.

This could only be the tomb of the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem.

The Lost Pharaoh – found at last!

'Is this...?' The tourist began

'Almost certainly,' I snapped back. 'And there'll be no talk of souvenirs or scratching one's name upon the stonework!'

'I wouldn't dream of–'

'Good!' I sighed. Our predicament was not this fellow's fault. I tempered my tone to continue, 'You must understand. If this *is* the tomb of the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem then it is a remarkable find. We remember her as the Lost Pharaoh. A female leader who supposedly died in dishonour, her crimes a mystery; her pyramid uncompleted, buried here in this unrecorded tomb so no–one would ever find her.'

'But now she has been found.'

I nodded, still examining the priceless artefacts which surrounded us. The tourist was moving too, examining things carefully but not, I was pleasantly surprised to notice, touching anything.

'You mentioned graffiti. I must confess an interest. I have heard stories of such markings on the tombs of the ancients. Is there anything like that here?'

I lifted the lamp, turning the wick up still further. 'It's not clear. I would have to conduct a proper survey to know for sure. But...'

'Yes?'

'There is something... unusual... about this place. Something... uncommon. Something...' I shook my head, fought back rising frustration. 'I can't quite put my finger on it.'

The tourist nodded. I frowned. Why was he so much more interested in the graffiti than the actual tomb, I wondered.

I was on the verge of raising this point when he turned towards me.

'I suppose I should introduce myself, and apologise for my untoward intrusion. My name is Burroughs. Edgar. I am a writer by trade, though that is not why I am here. No doubt you are wondering why–'

'Ssshh!' I put my finger to my lips. My manner was brusque but I could always apologise later. For now I needed silence. I thought I had heard–

I *had* heard.

The sound of voices beyond the concealed entrance to the chamber.

From the look on the tourist's face he had heard them too. He shot a swift glance towards the entrance – and the hole I had made. A sudden realisation filled me.

'The lamp–'

'I am an idiot!'

I swiftly turned down the wick – but it was too late. The lamp light must have been shining through the hole for many minutes, a beacon for our pursuers to see. The flickering glow had drawn them as surely as any moth. My turning down the wick must only have been the proof they needed, for I could hear excited voices raised beyond the concealed door, quickly followed by the sound of blows – hammers or picks, or the butts of pistols – against the wall.

The tourist gestured towards the open tunnel mouths. 'Is there another way out?'

'My friend this is an Egyptian tomb.' And in all likelihood a maze designed to trap those who walked its tunnels until they died of privation.

'I see. Do you have a second pistol?'

I stared at the tourist doubtfully. 'You can shoot?'

'Other than marching and riding, military service taught me little else in such thoroughgoing detail.'

I drew my spare pistol and handed it over. The tourist grasped it with full confidence, broke the stock to check the ammunition, then closed the gun with a practised flip of his wrist. He knocked the gun gently against the side of his head.

'For luck.'

I shuddered. *Americans.*

He gestured for the lamp. I handed it over. He turned the wick up as high as it would go, then set the lamp on the floor close to the entrance. Then he moved – again with surprising speed and silence – into the dark entrance of one of the tunnels. I made to follow him, but a gesture propelled me to a second tunnel.

'Crossfire,' he whispered.

I nodded, impressed with the simple tactic.

As I took up position in the tunnel mouth, shrouded in shadow, there was a loud *crunch* of falling stone and the robbers began to move into the tomb. At once I saw the tourist's plan. While they were still dazzled by the light from the lamp, he loosed two rapid shots. Two of the robbers fell, blocking the hole they had made. They were swiftly drawn away. Urgently hissed comments were exchanged, and then there came the sound of more hammering. I shuddered as I thought of the beautiful inscriptions now being laid waste. Moments later the hole was large enough for three men to scramble through. And three men did.

The tourist loosed off four more shots. The three robbers howled as bullets dug into their flesh. The last round smashed the lamp, spraying burning oil across the writhing bodies.

The tourist would have only one shot left. I had three shots left in my own pistol. My flight from the camp had been precipitously rapid – I had not managed to bring any spare ammunition, just the two pistols holstered beside my cot.

I had no idea how many men waited beyond the burning wall. More than four, surely. It would only take one, with a gun, and my adventure in Egypt would be curtailed – permanently.

'We should retreat,' I hissed across the intervening space to the tunnel mouth where the tourist had concealed himself.

If he made any any reply it was lost as the robbers finally employed an effective tactic of their own, shooting randomly through the middle of the gap into the darkness around us while figures scrambled though the hole at its edges, before spreading out through the darkness.

We were trapped.

Gunfire and shouting filled the chamber. I saw muzzle flashes in the darkness, sending dazzling sparks off burnished gold and precious stones. I took aim carefully, trying to work out where to shoot to make my limited ammunition count. Bullets whirred around me, embedding themselves in walls and floor, shattering many of the priceless artefacts. The robbers would not care. Gold was gold no matter how small the pieces.

I drew a bead on one robber creeping along the wall to my right. I was about to fire when a sensation akin to that one feels when taking a sudden unexpected fall filled my body. My stomach lurched. My head rang as if to the tolling of a gigantic bell. At the same moment an intense blue light filled the chamber. I blinked, dazzled. When my eyes adjusted to the glare I saw what was briefly, the most incredible sight of my life.

The lid of the alabaster sarcophagus was open. Standing therein was an impossible vision. A woman, not young but still beautiful, clad in a fighter's leather armour. Her face wore an expression of surprise – for about one second, before it was replaced by an expression of anger. She raised her arms. She was holding something. I could not see what. Mesmerised I could only watch as she manipulated the thing she held. Instantly it seemed the chamber was full of blue lightning. There seemed, momentarily, to be more than one of her, a superimposed image of the kind that maybe seen upon a damaged photographic plate. For an instant the chamber seemed to be full of other figures, men and women, strangers in odd clothes, all superimposed in the same manner. But I had no more than an instant to consider this before every single figure in the chamber dropped, felled as if by a crack marksman at the touch of the dazzling azure glare. I fell among them, my last sight being of the woman drawing two strangely shaped pistols from what were clearly weapons holsters at her hips.

Then the blue light took me, and everything was gone.

By my count I had but two bullets left. The horde charging towards me numbered at the least a hundred, red and green figures both. I have never considered myself a hero of any kind, but faced with these odds, where one's opponents not only outnumber one but are also more than twice one's height, I saw no other recourse but the oft–ridiculed *last stand.* Two at least of these monsters would accompany me to the afterlife.

My first shot drilled through the chest of one green giant, two red men, and finally lodged somewhere in the body of one unfortunate tomb robber who, running hither and yon, dithered too long in his choice of escape route. At once the nearest members of the mob diverted towards the bullet's final resting place and tore it apart in what I took at first to be a frenzied attack but which, as one emerged triumphant and made off with his prize, I realized had been nothing more than a search for my expended bullet.

**'IRRRRONN!'** crowed the victor, holding his prize aloft. At once he was mobbed.

Having no time to ponder this fresh mystery, I began to draw a bead on the next nearest assailant, another Green Man, when he exploded into a dazzling splash of azure lightning. I turned, astonished, to see the tourist wielding a glass gun, a weapon retrieved from our fallen first assailant. The gun was large in his grasp and it took both his fists to steady and aim – but he seemed to be doing a devastating job of wiping out our potential aggressors. Green Men, Red Men and tomb robbers exploded with blue light, thrashing, jerking and vaporising, eradicated as thoroughly as any fen mist by the rising sun.

I wondered briefly to which heaven, hell or other plane their souls would travel.

Then I turned, locating another of the glass weapons, fallen from its mighty owner's lumpen fist, and began to make my way towards it. Reaching the weapon I scooped it up, turning it over two–handed, searching for the firing mechanism. There was a trigger but no way to cock the weapon. Well then. It seemed straightforward enough. I raised the gun and began to look for targets, locking onto the nearest figure – then immediately freezing when I realised it was the woman, the violent, beautiful, impossible Pharaoh.

She frowned at me, then her frown turned into a kind of world–weary expression. As if she had waited a very long time for some theory to be borne out and now I had confirmed it for her. She wielded a glass gun in each hand, as slight as she was and as large as they were, and this fact alone would have been enough to stop any man in his tracks.

I found myself mumbling something, no doubt inane, which, fortunately, time has driven from my memory.

Her expression did not change. She simply aimed past me and fired.

'Help me,' she said between shots, in what under the present circumstances was shockingly normal English, 'Or this world will undoubtedly fall.'

And with this she began to retreat towards the sharp spines of rock on the nearby hill, firing as she did so.

I looked around for the tourist, catching of him, a fleeting glimpse between other

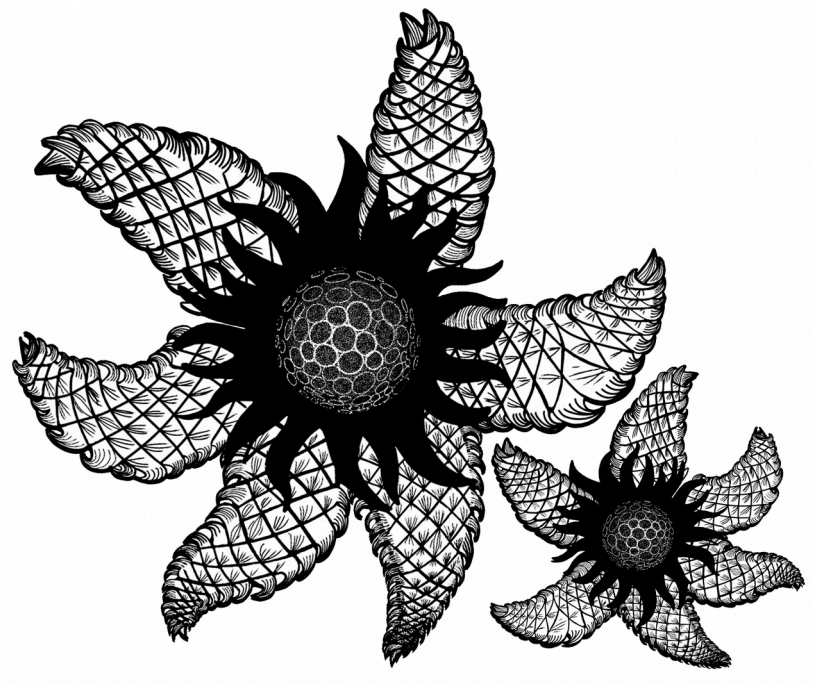
fighters. Even as I watched a solid blow from a gigantic fist thudded into his head and he vanished into the melee, the lightning gun falling from his nerveless fist. I knew there could be no recovery from that titanic blow, so allowing that fate had afforded me no other choice were I to live, I resolved to follow the Lost Pharaoh away from the battlefield, aiding her retreat as best I could.

With this in mind I turned away from the battle, only to realise my momentary hesitation had been my undoing. Spread out in a semicircle around me were no less than half a dozen red fighters, glass guns aimed unerringly at my head. I sighed. A long way behind them the Lost Pharaoh was moving rapidly without looking back, making every effort to lose herself again. It was clear I had no chance of catching up to her. Realizing this, I dropped my weapon and raised my hands in a gesture of surrender I fervently hoped would be universally understood.

As the red fighters closed in around me, the Pharaoh took a prodigious leap into a rocky arroyo and was lost to sight. I awaited my captors approach, and the arrival of an unclear but almost certainly deadly fate.

BOOK TWO

# TRAITORS OF MAAHES



**From the Account of Andrea Hansen**
**IV**
**The Black Flowers**

The air was cool, the light dim and reddish, when Andy awoke. She looked around without moving. After a moment she realised her eyes weren't open yet. She tried to open them. A short while later she tried again, with equal success.

'Hm.'

Well. She could definitely hear sounds. What they were, quite, was anybody's guess.

*'Three ounces of Tanqueray gin, One ounce of Stolichnaya vodka, half an ounce of Lillet Blanc. Add quinine powder to taste and shake with ice. Strain. Add lemon peel. Shoot someone evil.'*

'What's that?' A friendly voice asked. The voice was thick and fuzzy and tickled like over–friendly caterpillars as it crawled across her face and into her ears.

'A recipe for *Green Vesper* from a friend's bathroom reading collection which left me *The Walking Dead* for the best part of a week.' There was something familiar about the voice. Oh yes, that was it: it was hers. 'The cocktail, not the bathroom, I mean. Also, the reason I became a barrista and not a barmaid: fear of consistently

drunken failure. I *think* there's a word for it but I can't for the life of me remember it just now.'

Andy tried for a third time to open her eyes. Someone out there had a flashbulb. Lots of flashbulbs. Were the press here? Was everyone taking selfies? Maybe she should grab her phone and join in with the–

'How did my head get to be a rock–star–light–show, remind me?'

A man – young middle aged, an inquisitive look on a face which might once have been kindly – was staring down at her. The face smiled. Hands joined the face. Human hands. Calluses. A wedding ring. The hands helped her to sit up, then produced a stone jug. She drank. Something cool and delicious and unidentifiable.

'More water?'

Andy swallowed again. She became aware that her throat was burning only when the water eased the pain.

'Wow,' she forced out some caterpillars of her own. 'Water huh? That actually feels pretty–'

With no warning at all, Andy's stomach muscles clenched. She doubled over and retched. The hands were already waiting with a shallow, sand–carved stone bowl.

Andy spat a couple of times, then sat up and took a second, more cautious sip of water.

'Yeeuucch. Kozlowed much?' Andy wiped her mouth, thinking it was a good thing she hadn't managed to get her phone out. Then looked at her hand and frowned. 'How did I get sand in my...?'

'Just rest for now. Your flyer crashed. And you've been attacked. But you're safe now. You'll be fine soon. So just rest and later we can talk.'

A thought struggled to emerge from the tiredness infusing Andy's body.

'Ibrahim. My friend. The man. In the flyer. Where is he? And what about Matt? My brother? You said–'

The hovering face remained carefully neutral. 'Just rest. Later we can talk.'

Andy struggled to sit up; somehow found herself lying flat instead.

One last, huge flashbulb tore back the curtain of memory to reveal two faces, one older, one younger, both inverted, starkly illuminated, caked with blood and sand.

'Ibrahim... Matt...'

The faces made no comment, nor was any needed. The knowledge that her friend and her brother were dead was an absolute surety which pursued her with the patient violence of any Komodo dragon back into the dark forest of sleep.

Time passed. Dreams lingered.

Butterflies and dragons: red, green and blue.

*She closed the book. The soft rustle of old parchment was a wonder in a world where trees – even the most intelligent ones – were an endangered species.*

*She frowned. How did she know it was a wonder, again?*

*She opened the book, a random page.*

*My Dearest Emma,*

*My death and the life which followed, were these to be made public via any method other than fiction, and that of the most fantastic kind, would cause such outcry as to ruin forever the reputation of this humble chronicler of literary fancy–*

*Blue crystals. Azure rays. Still light, pooling. But how could there be water here?*

*She drifted in sunlight. A blue rainbow. Kaleidoscope time.*

*With her, a woman made of red.*

*No – a red woman.*

*A Princess.*

*A Red–*

*–Men are all mothers. The Green Men are our children. Is it not every mother's destiny to–*

*Rock and metal shrieked as the red flyer smashed into the ground. Blood and sand. The hug of the earth, crushing her bones. Lightning in a body made of glass thudding closer. Living fulgarite. Hunting.*

*Ibrahim.*

*The crowd were silent as he smashed into the ground. Blood and sand. A jewelled dagger finding the space between his ribs. The drums in his chest faltering. Stopping.*

*Matt.*

*MATT!*

*For the longest time there was no time at all, only chaos.*

*Even chaos may pass.*

Books. Notebooks. Journals. Softly graded rays from blue glass lamps. Shelves made of lumpy stone tiles. A room. A library. Dejah Thoris. John Carter. Tarzan. Jane. *A Princess of–*

Sixty years of a man's life. The life of *ERB*. Drawings too. Watercolours. Signed *HC*.

Edgar Rice Burroughs? Howard Carter?

Something was missing. Something important. Something... *blue.*

*–The Red Men are all mothers. The Green Men are our children. Is it not every mother's destiny to destroy their child?–*

*A memory. Not hers. A – blue? – memory. Burroughs memory? Or no– his memory of something Carter had told him. Something someone else had told him. The Emperor of Ages. No, not Emperor. Not yet. Just plain Tanta Sten Calcanganese, a Fighting Man of Maahes–*

The strangely jumbled *(memories they were blue)* images in her head were interrupted when the densely woven mat sealing off the library cave was pulled

aside. A man stood framed in the uneven opening, head scraping the roughly chiselled stone lintel, one hand curled around the mat. The hand was familiar. Young middle–aged, toughened by war. A wedding ring.

*My Dearest Emma–*

'You're the guy who pulled me from the flyer.'

He waited. There was a look on his face. A strange look, part sadness, part... but she couldn't put her finger on it.

'Edgar, right? You saved my life.'

'And, in so doing, must now accept responsibility for that life.'

Andy blinked. Suddenly the present moment – the precise, exact, present moment in which her consciousness currently resided fully and completely – slammed home with the persistent violence of a car crash.

'You can keep your proverbs,' Andy said firmly. 'But I'll take a chapter of backstory, for sure.'

The man nodded. His strange expression was replaced by a faint but warm smile.

'And coffee, if you have any. About a gallon, as strong as you can make it.'

There was no coffee, just a soupy liquid dressed in scum which looked disgusting but smelled delicious and tasted even better. Andy hugged the stone jug to her chest, closing her eyes to drink, and waited to see what would happen.

The man *(Burroughs, his name was Edgar Rice)* poured himself a jug of the strange brew, and then sat cross–legged on the brightly coloured mats covering the uneven floor of the largest cave. He waited, studying her closely. Andy waited for his stare to become uncomfortable and when, after a few minutes of semi–companionable silence it did not, revised her opinion upwards by a single, cautious notch.

'Hm.' The man savoured the aroma of his drink, then sipped. 'It's not coffee. But considering it's taken six decades to achieve this palatable a flavour I cannot in truth recommend holding out for a more successful blend.'

Andy resisted smiling. Something about this guy – about this whole crazy trip not to put too fine a point on it; princesses, cowboys, flying boats and all – made her want to grab her phone and just start shooting. How else was anyone ever going to believe her when she got home? Another few moments passed. The drink stayed hot but Andy perched her jug on the stone floor beside the mat, having taken barely a sip. Somehow her overwhelming desperation for home–ground seemed to have faded.

'In truth I drink from habit more than pleasure these days. But habits are not necessarily a bad thing, reinforcing as they do the order of the day and the structure of one's life.' Burroughs drained his jug and placed it aside. 'Without which, as I have learned, one's mental well–being is apt to decline markedly.'

'Mental well–being huh?' Andy tried on a grin. When there was no response she made a sympathetic noise, then exhaled: the sigh of the long suffering waitress. 'I should apologise. For the social misfire, I mean. I've worked in a university cafe for – well, time–out–of–mind it, seems, on some days. It's just a little strange to be on this side of the table, that's all.'

Burroughs nodded minutely, eyes narrowed in focus but still somehow distant; the same unconscious expression worn by a thousand caffeine–mainlined students pushed hard up against their deadlines by the pitiless structure of academia. Unlike the students, however, Andy got the feeling Burroughs hadn't understood a single word she'd said.

'You're not from around here, right?' Andy fell back on the classic waitressing gambit. The moment the words were out of her mouth, she realised how utterly ridiculous they sounded. 'I mean, you're American, right? From the South?' She studied the man sitting opposite her for a reaction, found none. 'And, y'know, the eighteen hundreds.'

She waited, and was finally rewarded with a minute smile.

*Not entirely unreachable, then.*

Burroughs sighed, shifting position on the woven mate. 'I wish we had met under more auspicious circumstances.'

Andy felt a soft, icy shock race through her limbs.

Words, unspoken, slipped like ghosts through her mind.

*You remind me of a young man I once knew. His name was Matthew. He was English, a London accent as is yours. I failed to save your brother, and therefore remain bound under obligation to complete the task he had set himself. To find you. In that I have at least succeeded.*

Memory and blue memory – *Maahes sickness* – colliding hard, shockwaves crashing, a tidal wave in her mind.

Andy struggled not to cry out.

'His name was Matthew? Matt? What was his last name? How did you know him? How did he die? Tell me!'

Burroughs favoured her with the look of a man who has received answers to questions he'd never asked. 'Hansen. Matthew Hansen. He was looking for his sister. I don't think he found her. He died, you see. He died saving my life. Sixty years ago.'

*Blue.*

*Everything was*
*blue it was all*
*blue a blue*
*scream*
*and*
she
cried out
as the familiar

face fell from light to darkness. Red to blue and back to red. Apart from the long, sun–bleached hair it was the same face she'd glared at and argued with every day since they were... well... every day.

*What will mum and dad say?*

Andy felt a shriek building in her chest.

*Mum and dad wouldn't say anything would they? Of course they wouldn't. What*

*with them pushing up daisies and all they weren't going to say a single solitary thing.*

The shriek in Andy's chest reached her mouth. It wanted out – big time. She clamped her mouth shut, biting down until her teeth ground like sandpaper and her lip bled. She was *not* going to let that shriek out. *Hell* if she was.

'The buggering... *idiot.'* She had no idea the words would come out so loud, or so furiously, or so... well, so much like the idiot bro. 'What does the selfish little *shit* think he's–'

She broke off, gulped back the rest of what she had been going to say, forgot it the instant she did so. Then there was nothing. Just his eyes. His dumb–ass beatnik hair, scraping his shoulders. The single tiny, perfectly round scar above his left eyebrow from chicken pox contracted when he was eleven.

The bloody hole punched through his chest as if by a giant's fist.

'What happened... I mean... how... how did he...?

But Andy never finished the question. In truth she did not need to. The knowledge was already hers, a gift of the *Maahes* attack; a jumbled kaleidoscope of time and someone else's memory.

*The Emperor of Ages. Torn apart.*
*The Green tribes. Attacking*
Burroughs' memory.
*Death and*
*blood*
*and*

she ran, retreating into sleep, but the memory followed, patient and lethal, its Komodo bite needing only time to kill.

*The healing pool. Waterlight.*
*Drifting. Breath gone.*
*The Red Princess.*

*Something was wrong.*
*With her.*
*Mind with*
*her* (maahes it was) *memories*
*weren't*
(maahes sickness)
*they weren't*

*they weren't* hers.

*Blue light. Blue water.*
*Red hands on her body.*
*Pressure points. Scented water.*
*Scented vapour. Blue light.*
*Blue–*

*–hair. His hair was too–*

–light flared and faded. The water was cool and dim and just water now. The cave arched overhead, whorled slabs of yellow–ochre, interspersed with a rusty brown colour, rough edged, a shallow dome capped with a wide, faceted, lenticular blue crystal.

Plants. Black flowers. Vast as time, velvet smooth.

Shadow–flowers. Blooming in the darkness.

Andy blinked. Water drained from her open eyes. The world shimmered, soft blue and mauve. Red hands – *(wide and flat and too many)* – lifted her. Butterflies. Falling. Something warm and fuzzy. A blanket. Wool? Animal skin? It didn't matter.

The hands – *(fingers they had too many)* – moved again.

Pressure points.

Andy slept.

When she awoke again it was as if from a years–long sleep filled with strange and disconcerting dreams. Dreams as real as *(my)* any

*(early)*

*reality to which she)*

*(education in Greek and*

*(awoke was strange as)*

*Latin, in addition to English Composition, and my later studies and further research in classical literature and mythology having lead me to believe that a cure for my weakened heart (the reason for my medical discharge from the Confederate Army) might be found in the esoteric medicine of more exotic lands, I set out into the world by horse and ship, lured by a horizon that seemed ever to recede before me, that*

*(carried me from home and hearth at a)*

*continued on my*

*(speed which at first I found)*

*my journey through the remote corners of the world, Africa and India, and across the remote plateaux of Tibet to China, arriving after many months and more adventures, in the land of the great Kings of Antiquity, where rumours of an ancient find among the sterile deserts of an ancient kingdom might yield the medicinal*

*miracle I sought. And thus I came to seek a guide to lead me deep into the desert, to the fabled Valley of the Kings. This being the place in which I died – in a manner of speaking – for the first*

*(not know how long I fell, or)*

*time passed before*

*(how much)*

*passed before my senses returned, but when they did it was to the sound of instructions whispered at me sharply in a British accent. 'The name is Carter, sir: Howard to my friends, among whom I do not count petty officials or tourists; and I have the thoroughgoing misfortune be the man in charge of this excavation – or anyway I did until the small hours of this morning when these blasted fellows saw fit to–'*

*I interjected another question, which seemed to rouse my companion's ire even further.*

*'Tomb robbers? Of course they're ruddy tomb robbers! Now for the sake of all things holy be quiet before they hear us and shoot us! The itinerant buggers have been trying to kill me all night! Thanks to you they've found a way in. Now look sharp or the*

*(tourist made any)*

*Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem won't be*

*the tourist made*

*(the only corpse in Tomb 41!')*

*made any reply it was lost as the robbers finally employed an effective tactic of their own, shooting randomly through the middle of the gap into the darkness around us while figures scrambled though the hole at its edges, before spreading out through the darkness.*

*We were trapped.*

*Gunfire and shouting filled the chamber. I saw muzzle flashes in the darkness, sending dazzling sparks off burnished gold and precious stones. I took aim carefully, trying to work out where to shoot to make my limited ammunition count. Bullets whirred around me, embedding themselves in walls and floor, shattering many of the priceless artefacts. The robbers would not care. Gold was gold no matter how small the pieces.*

*I drew a bead on one robber creeping along the wall to my right. I was about to fire when a sensation akin to that one feels when taking a sudden unexpected fall*

*filled my body. My stomach lurched. My head rang as if to the tolling of a gigantic bell. At the same moment an intense blue light filled the chamber. I blinked, dazzled. When my eyes adjusted to the glare I saw what was, briefly, the most incredible sight of my life.*

*The lid of the alabaster sarcophagus was open. Standing therein was an impossible vision. A woman, not young but still beautiful, clad in a fighter's leather armour and sporting blue glass panels where metal would normally have been fitted. Her face wore an expression of surprise – for about one second, before it was replaced by an expression of anger. She raised her arms. She was holding something I could not see clearly. Mesmerised I could only watch as she manipulated the thing she held. Instantly it seemed the chamber was full of blue lightning. Every single figure in the chamber dropped instantly, felled as if by a crack marksman. I fell too, my last sight being of the woman drawing two strangely shaped pistols, also made from blue glass, from what were clearly weapons holsters at her hips.*

*Then the blue light took me, and*

*everything*

*(reality)*

*was*

*(gone it was)*

the reality to which

she awoke was *(gone it was)* strange as *(real as)* any of her dreams.

She lay still, eyes closed, ordering her thoughts, letting sensations from around her filter in through the fast–fading cloud of sleep; letting memories seep back into her conscious mind; letting the heady brew distil slowly into cohesive thought.

Burroughs. Burroughs and Carter. Washed away from Earth and beached here on Maahes - just as she, Matt, Erimem and Ibrahim had been, and by the same apparition: *The Lost Pharaoh* - but arriving at different times and places in Maahosian history.

Andy took a deep breath, held it for a slow ten count, let it out. It was a technique she'd come to use when dealing with petty officialdom which had served her well on Earth. If she was lucky it would serve as well here on Maahes.

Her racing heartbeat slowed as she counted down in her head. Her awarenes at last settled fully on the *here–and–now.* She let her breathing normalise and took stock. She wasn't hungry. She didn't feel sick. A distant sadness infused her but that was OK. Everything was OK. There was rock under her. Rock covered with animal skins, woven blankets, cured leather.

There were voices nearby. Hushed, insistent. An argument? No. A discussion. She listened, with no sense of urgency.

–the plan *failed,* Djora, failed to the tune of half a dozen Navy Corvettes and one irreplacable storm mine, so what do you suggest we–

**–need to state the obvious–**

–*obvious* that attempting to infiltrate the Green Men was a fool's–

**–if the Green men practiced proper politics subterfuge would not have been necessary!–**

The words faded in and out. Three voices. Two she knew. One she didn't. Except she did. Burroughs. His name was Burroughs. He was a writer. No – a *soldier. A young* – no an *old* – wait.

Andy let her thoughts assume a more ordered progression.

He was a young man *and* an old man – both at the same time.

Ninety years of memories in a thirty year old body.

Carter – the same.

The Princess – she was different. Physically younger. Sixty years, maybe? Still a young woman; by the measure of the Red Men, barely older than Andy herself. So... she aged differently. More slowly... and her memories were – *different.* Cooler. More... reptilian? No. deliberate? Manufactured? Maybe–

***–White Man's breathing has changed. White Man is–***

Fully awake at last, Andy opened her eyes and sat up. The movement was easy. No pain. No dizziness. Carter and the Princess sat nearby. Burroughs stood beyond them, a dark shape barely outlined in the lamplight flooding the middle of the cavern. All three were watching her closely.

Andy did not look around. She knew exactly where she was.

'It's OK,' she told them. 'I remember. I mean – I remember properly now.'

Three faces, waiting, watching, expectant.

'Djora, Edgar, Howard.' Andy named her observers in order of reducing height. She took a breath and drew her legs into lotus. Thank heavens for yoga. She might survive after all. 'My name is Andrea. Andrea Clare Hansen. Andy. But you know that.' She nodded at Burroughs. 'At least you do, Ed, because we shared memories when the *maahes* attacked. Ibrahim is dead. He died in the crash, or very shortly afterwards. You remember seeing my brother, a long time ago. Sixty years ago. You fought with him, against the Red Men in a gladitorial arena. You saw him die.'

'He died saving my life.'

'No.' A sad smile touched Andy's lips. *His chest. The bloody wound in his chest.* 'He died mouthing off, because he's an idiot and he never knew when to shut up. But thank you for the lie.'

Her hosts exchanged glances.

'What else?' Carter's voice was just as she remembered. A warm baritone, the English accent as finely chiseled as his face, barely out of place in its outlandish interplanetary surroundings.

Andy shifted her gaze to Burroughs, waiting patiently in the shadows at the edge of the light. 'Given what you had to work with, you've made a wonderful home.'

'Thank you.'

Djora and Carter exchanged smiles. The Princess' smile was... *scary.*

'Your library is amazing.' *All the more so because the only trees on Maahes are malicious carnivores.* 'Did you write all the books? Your letters to Emma are... well.' Suddenly embarrassed, Andy shifted tack. 'Grammar aside, your stories are actually pretty cool.' She chuckled. 'Me Tarzan, you Jane.'

Burroughs frowned. The frown became a slow smile. ' "Cool..." ' He chuckled, apparently satisfied with her only mildly damning review of what in any other circumstances would have been a lifetime's work.

Andy stood up smoothly from lotus. 'I like the gravity here. Handy if you're a tad on the pizza-friendly side.' She stretched, wriggled her fingers. The air in the cavern was cool and dry. 'Alright then, in order.' She ticked off points, remembering experiences that were not her own. 'This is your home, Ed. It's a secret place only you, Ward and a handful of others know of. You live here because of the Red–Green war, which you've all been trying to stop for... well, a long time now, decades, with no real success as yet. You've been hiding out here for years, consolidating your research, developing theories about the relationship between the Green Men and the Red... and... yeah... the *Blue Men.* Did they really die out a million years ago? Maybe they're coming back...? Out there, out there on the father dune, they call you *Sorceror.* It's a term of respect. But not of kindness.' The memories became fuzzy so Andy shifted direction. 'I've been here nearly a month. It took me that long to heal from the *maahes* attack when the flyer crashed.' Andy avoided the Red Princess' glance. Those *eyes.* 'I should thank you for helping me, Djora.'

**'The healing pool is a blessing. The blue rays help. But the strength was yours, Andreaclare. It is the strength of the Pharaoh. The strength of White Men.'**

'Andy, please. You'll sound like my mum. Except, y'know, through nightclub bass bins.'

The Princess' eyes narrowed – sideways, not vertically – the equivalent of a thoughtful frown. After a moment she nodded slowly. Andy glimpsed the play of muscle under the perfect skin – then tried very hard *not* to have glimpsed it. *Too weird. Don't go there, our kid.*

'And, oh yeah, the Lost Pharaoh, FYI.' Andy half closed her eyes, searching memories, blue memories, other than her own. 'Is there a connection between her and the Blue Men? If not then why...' Andy hesitated. Something out there, something deep in the blue was... oh yeah. 'You came to Maahes from the tomb as well. From Erimem's tomb. *Tomb 41.'*

Carter leaned a little closer. Andy noticed for the first time he had a tablet – no, a *sketchpad* – in one hand and was outlining a drawing with a tiny, worn pencil stub. A drawing of her. A portrait. Did she find that odd? Even creepy? Under the circumstances she guessed not. Given how long he and Burroughs been marooned on Maahes, she was argubably a more exotic sight than the Princess herself. As weird as that might actually be.

Andy tucked a lock of hair which had fallen into her face back behind her ear, wondering if now was the moment to grab her phone and introduce all and sundry to the concept of digital selfies. 'Don't feel you have to be *slavishly* accurate.'

Carter grinned, a little sheepishly she thought, then stuffed the pad and pencil in his pocket.

A little further back, in the warm shadows of the cavern, Burroughs shifted position. 'Tomb 41. The Valley of the Kings. The same place–'

'–you met Ward, yeah. Someone was shooting at you. Trying to rob you? Yeah, that's it. You were trying to get away from them.' Andy frowned. 'You could have shot them though, right? You're a soldier.'

'I *was* a solder. I chased Indians. But I confess all I ever caught was–'

'–dysentery, I remember.' Andy struggled to push aside a queasy clench far down in the pit of her stomach. 'Unpleasant.'

'Quite.'

Andy searched her memory – *his* memory – for any more information. Veils were coming down now. Healing, it seemed, was separation. For White Men, anyway.

'Well, that brings us up to date I guess. So here we are. What's next?' A strange, sick feeling began to rise in Andy's chest. 'Can we bury... I mean...' She sighed. *Ibrahim.* 'No of course not. The father dune will have taken what the *maahes* left.'

The Princess seemed about to rise, maybe to approach.

'Don't.' Andy put up her hand. 'It's OK. I'm good...' *Ibrahim. Matt.* 'I am, I'm good. I just need–'

There was something hot on her face. Hot and wet. Tears.

Andy pushed past the others and ran from the cave.

Time went fuzzy for a while.

That at least she was fairly sure of. Not fuzzy in the *I've had my memories smooshed up like a plasticine pug with someone else's when a giant scorpion–thing made of living glass and lightning tried to suck out my brains for a yummy mid–morning snack* kinda way. That was over, at least for now. *(Because, hey, there was plenty of protein in a brain, right?)* But funny in the far more prosaic and soul–destroying *what will everyone think now that I've got my boss and my kid brother killed on an alien planet* kind of way.

Telling herself it was not her fault wasn't an option.

Telling herself she blamed Erimem and her time–bling was equally not an option.

Because of course it *was* her fault. Everyone would think so, and they would be right, and it would be true. She was the dingbat's legal guardian. She'd fought like a mother–cat to keep the privilege against the epic tide of red tape and paperwork the state had challenged her with. And now she'd wasted her victory. Because he was dead. They both were. Matt and Ibrahim. Were. DEAD.

Telling herself (again!) it was neither her own nor Erimem's fault was an option for a few minutes, but then things took a (nother) turn for the weird because even as she found herself telling herself this, Andy came face to face with an image of Erimem that finally did have her reaching for her phone.

The image was a painting – it looked like watercolours – just one of what seemed to be an entire cavern chock full of similar paintings; ditto sketches, carvings, ceramics; blue–tinged glass cases filled with such a multiplicity of Erimemephemera

that–

Andy's head began to spin.

She wandered among the exhibits, a museum raised to her friend. Time out of mind. Hours? Days? There was no way of telling.

Numb hysteria. Blinding headache. Cramps in her cheeks from crying.

More cramps in her hand from clenching the phone with her finger repeatedly stabbing the *record* button.

There were portraits of Erimem on skin or stone, carvings on stone coins, hand tools, and other items, reliefs made of the most beautiful ceramic tiles, blue–glass busts... sand paintings in airtight cases... the entire hall of mirrors rapidly attaining the proportions of hysterical psychedelia. Every image was of Erimem at a different age, from what seemed like a teenager right up until what was clearly late middle age. Every exhibit was dated. The handwritten info–cards (Andy nearly shrieked at the shockingly prosaic nature of these) ranged in complexity from haiku–short to several pages long. There were other cases which held what looked like scrolls made of animal skin, tablets made of blue glass or other ceramic. Other cases held notebooks filled with small, abrasively neat writing. Letters like saw teeth. A hand she recognised, for it was the same hand that had, in another cavern, depicted *Pellucidar* and *Mars* and *(–My Dearest Emma–)*. Andy could barely take in the wealth of detail, let alone the information content of her surroundings. On one matter, though, she was more than clear: everything in this gallery pertained to her friend. It was the ultimate collector's edition. Every toy in the Weetabix set. According to the dates some of them were *half a million years old.*

Finally, feeling much like an abused Weetabix toy herself, her consciousness utterly and unfairly bruised, Andy simply wound down and stopped, stood swaying for a moment, then collapsed in a human puddle as if she would never move again. Tears flooded down her face and sobs racked her body.

She hated Matt. She hated Erimem. She hated herself for hating them. What was the sosh going to think when she couldn't even produce a body? Was she going to have to report him to the police? What would they do? There'd *be* no body. Would she be a suspect? Was she going to have to spend weeks faking a story to cover the truth? Or should she tell the truth and – if there was time before they locked her up and threw away the room – try to prove she wasn't completely and utterly cuckoo for coco–puffs?

But of course she *was* cuckoo for coco–puffs. She *totally* was. Because he was DEAD. They both were. And you'd think that dealing with the death of your parents would somewhat prepare you for this but of course it never did, never *could.* Not in a hundred years. Not on a thousand planets. Matt and Ibrahim were dead. Her bro and her boss were DEAD. Pushing up daisies. They were no–more. They were defunct. They were – ha ha – *ex–bloody–persons.*

*Nothing* could prepare you for that.

Not even having a three thousand year old Egyptian Pharaoh decked out in time–bling as your hot bestie.

No. Because right now the one thing Andy was sure of was this: if she ever saw

Erimem again she was going to punch her hard enough for her *grand–children* to be born bruised.

But not, of course, before she'd kicked *herself* in the head a hundred times worse. For being a useless guardian. For not kicking his brainless teenage ass when she could have done. For not hugging him when she should have done. For not... for not...

Andy sat on the floor in the gallery of her friend's life, in the absurdity that was her own, and smacked her fists into the scalloped rock floor until her knuckles bled for the lives she'd lost.

The pain didn't bring them back.

Either of them.

Strange time.

Jumbled moments that somewhat shook themselves out when Andy became aware she was not alone in the gallery.

'Hey Eddie.' She didn't – *couldn't* – bring herself to look up. 'How're the Cruisers?'

He said exactly what she expected: nothing.

*Two worlds divided by a common tongue.*

'Sorry. My bad.'

Burroughs shook his head slowly, analytically. 'Nothing here is your fault, so far as I am able to determine.'

*Small mercies, then.*

For a moment she thought Burroughs was going to crouch beside her, do the whole tedious comfort–the–crying–woman thing. She was glad when he didn't. Then she was glad she was glad. That she *could* be glad. About anything. Then the guilt thudded home and her gut turned to fire and the gladness absconded to a place she thought she might never find again.

'The Lost Pharaoh. She's known to you.'

The observation – not a question, she noticed – was something of a deflection; Andy grabbed it and hung on for dear life. 'Well. She travels in time, so yeah, this–' She waved her hand vaguely around the gallery. '–could all be from her future, from my future.' She sighed. 'The future compared to the time I knew her in – know her *from* – you know what I mean.'

Burroughs nodded slowly, his thoughtful expression deepening.

*Just tell me you've read The Time Machine and we're golden.*

But Burroughs said nothing. Turning it over in his mind. Turning *her* over.

For the first time Andy noticed there were twin holstered long-barrelled blue–glass pistols slung at his hips, for all the world as if he was a Civil War soldier. She blinked. *Monkeybrain. He* is *a Civil War soldier.* The pistols had ceramic stocks and triggers. She had no doubt they fired something more deadly than bullets.

*Can you twirl them thar shootin' irons mistah–*

She stopped the thought as soon as she noticed it. She knew he could. Burroughs was a crack shot. She remembered the kick of the gun, the sheer exultation she'd felt

the first time *(s)*he'd fired one.

*How could I ever have forgotten that?*

If he noticed it at all, Burroughs allowed her internal dialogue to pass him by.

'The Red Men think she's an urban legend. The Green Men think she's a desert myth. For most of their recorded history The Lost Pharaoh is the only thing they have in common.' Burroughs ran his fingers lightly along a display case, as if wiping it free of dust. 'I've been collecting references to her for decades. Myths and artefacts. Images. Oral traditions, precisely transcribed. History places her at every significant socio–political conjoining this world has known. Every war too. The Green glassdreamers believe she's an aspect of destiny made manifest.'

*The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come.*

'Dickens.' Burroughs seemed to divine her thought, and nodded in appreciation. 'A visionary observer of English social drama. But he should have been a fantasist.' A distant expression passed across Burroughs' face. For a moment the ghost of Jacob Marley inhabited the room. Or perhaps it was a different, more familiar ghost. 'And... you have him... on *blue–ray–'*

Burroughs drew one pistol; twirled it back and forth gunslinger style; his movements sparse, precise; letting the grip slap into his palm; finally spinning the ceramic cylinder in the glass frame. He glanced along the muzzle – blue glass, the barest glimmer of light; followed the glance with a slide of the thumb along the coils. Watching him, Andy remembered blue fire engulfing the Corsair. Blue rays from the glass cannon; death and devastation and faces, red and green, dissolving in–

'Different blu–ray.'

Burroughs considered the weapon for a moment longer then, satisfied, snugged it back into its holster.

A moment passed in silence. Burroughs paced slowly through the gallery, drinking in the decades old collection as if he were seeing it now for only the first time.

'You've got it all wrong, you know.'

'Oh?' Burroughs half turned away from the blue–glass sculpture he was examining.

'Erimem. She's not a myth. She's real. I know her. And she'll tell you there's no such thing as destiny. No such things as gods. It's why she left Egypt. Well, it's not why – but it would have been, if she hadn't been taken away. If you see what–'

'I do. Actually–'

*(Green men in the high desert. A storm of swords. An iron bullet.)*
*(The desert raiders, ghosts now, zombies, gone to the lightning.)*

'–I *remember.'*

Andy frowned. 'You do?

'I remember all your memories of her.'

Andy shifted uncomfortably. *Everything?*

Burroughs smiled. 'Just because I remember your memories, it doesn't mean I

understand them. They're fading in any case. I will forget them soon, as you will mine. Perhaps just a ghost will remain. But that will be all.'

Andy felt the burn in her cheeks subside. 'So when you say "soon"...'

'No more than a few years. A decade at most.'

'Well thanks be for small mercies.' Somehow Andy managed to keep every single atom of irony out of her voice.

'I wholeheartedly–'

*(A vision of azure fire. Beauty unparalleled. The Lost Pharaoh.)*
*(Blue glass. The Eye of Erimem, alone in the dark.)*

'–concur.'

Andy pushed herself up off the ground. She grabbed her phone and stuffed it into her pocket. Burroughs shot a glance at the bloody hand–prints she left on the rocky floor. Andy clocked the glance and sighed.

'Yeah, I know. The healing pool. You're not wrong.'

Andy clenched and unclenched her fists, then rubbed her palms against her jeans. It wasn't as if one more set of unwashable stains would make a difference now.

She moved along the gallery after Burroughs, careful to keep a respectful distance between them.

'What's the Heinz, E...' Andy directed her musing to a ceramic bust of Erimem, who appeared to be depicted at the age of around forty. Did the woman in the display case – who reminded Andy of nothing more than an exhibit in Ibrahim's museum – know what would happen in Andy's future? If she did would it ever be of any use? How could it be? '… gonna spill them ol' beanz?'

'The future... the past...' Burroughs spoke without turning. 'These aspects of our journey through life appear to be connected in ways that are not immediately apparent to me.'

*My friend, You are most assuredly not whistling Dixie.* As if triggered by Burroughs' words, a sudden wellspring of memory bubbled up from the blue depths n Andy's head. *Vast cities. Libraries. Laboratories. Animals even stranger than the people who rode them. War. Death. A blue world, turning red; red and green. Should ne'er be seen. Except with a god queen in between–*

A watercolour of Erimem was stretched on a crude easel, between curved blue–glass daggers, one with a shattered blade. Andy stared, captivated, lost in the exotic rendered somehow mundane, even familiar. The painting was beautiful. Barely less than lifelike. Carter had painted this, she remembered, a very long time ago. She wanted to touch it. Touch the face depicted here. The painting itself was twice as old as she was, the woman depicted older still.

*First there were blue men, then there were red,*
*Then there were green men; yellow instead,*

The *(thoughts? memories?)* words came with the images... connected, unconnected. Scattered seeds, black in the blue, shards of the glassdream, of *Maahes* sickness, of other times and places.

Blue memories for a red world.

*Somewhen, somewhere, out in the blue,*

*Green men are dancing, and Red men too.*

'... its a war out there. Red against Green. And somewhere... somewhere... the Blue men are waiting... to return? To live again?'

Andy gripped the sides of the easel holding the watercolour. The pain from her bloody knuckles penetrated the dream–like haze of memory. 'I remember these things...' She shook her head. Frustration. Fear. 'I *don't* understand them.'

Burroughs nodded. Did *he* understand?

'We can talk about him if you like. About your brother. The way he died.'

Andy found her teeth were chattering. Not with cold. The fire in her gut, and her face, was back.

'I want to talk about him. I need to. But not yet. And not with you. You remember him dying. It's too...' *A silent crowd. Fear and anger. A hole the size of her fist in his chest.* 'I can't go there. Not... Sorry. I just can't.'

Burroughs nodded.

'That I do understand.'

He was talking to an empty room.

The healing cave was deep underground, a walk of half a kilometre or so from the part of the cavern system in which Burroughs had made his home. Andy walked there alone, with only her thoughts for company; her memories... well... someone else's thoughts and memories. Disturbing images of places and people she'd never seen. America; the civil war, presumably. A pretty but rather severe–looking woman in an off–the–shelf *(My Dearest)* high necked *(Emma)* dress. Two children. Infants, really. A nameless boy and *(I am Tarzan of the Apes. I am yours. You are Jane Porter, I saw it in your letter. When you see this you will know that Tarzan of the Apes loves you.)* girl... And... *Egypt;* her arrival here, on an alien planet seven dreams sideways from her own, a world NASA would have a honkin' field day with if they could but train their fancy orbiting telescopes upon it. Memories she tried, not entirely successfully, to push aside.

Her surroundings were strangely familiar: striated rock and striated time; the one overlaid on... no, *interwoven with* the other. It should have been howlingly alien – but somehow was not. Somehow it was almost... comforting... the eerie strangeness more exotic than fearful.

A maze.

She was walking a maze made of striated rock and luminescent moss and shimmering memory all shuffled together like a magician's deck.

And then she wasn't walking. She was sitting down at the scalloped edge of a wide, shallow pool; a series of pools which stretched off through a succession of interlinked domed caverns into the gloom. Pools illuminated by blades of sunlight cutting down through jagged cracks in the roof. Red sunlight turned blue by the crystal strata in the rock above, by anaerobic bacteria in the pool... an underground garden as warm and wet as the outside world was cold and dry... a garden of strange

light and stranger foliage and stranger still delights more than half a kilometre below the surface of the planet... a testament to the persistence of life as wondrous as any she had seen.

Andy took off her hiking boots, rolled up her jeans and dangled her feet in the water. It looked warm but wasn't. In fact it was viciously cold. She gasped. She didn't remember it being this cold. She *slooshed* her feet around until the water felt warmer, trying to let her mind go blank. She remembered she was here for her hands and rolled up her sleeves. When she put her hands in the water it didn't feel so cold. She noticed her skin had taken on the mauve colouring of the water. Something was tickling her legs. Andy giggled, remembering her last birthday, a treat paid for by her book–club buddies. A day in a health spa. Her feet in a pool full of hungry fish. The sensation of nibbling. The tickling sensation spread to her hands. The skin was turning mauve. The bacteria. Something about the bacteria in the–

Light pulsed through the striations in the roof. A shaft of blue light washed across the pool she was in. Was the light falling on the pools? Or was it being summoned by the water, the bacteria, her own need?

Blue rays. Like water. But... *but...*

Something like the taste of cool menthol spread through her muscles.

*Wow.*

Hands moved on her shoulders. Red hands with fingers as long as her forearm. She wasn't surprised. She wasn't frightened. She simply *was.*

*Time, unfolding.*

Later.

The shafts of light were dimmer, more red than blue; a warmer colour but cooler in temperature. A soft whispering sussuration wove patterns through the air of the cavern system. The plants were moving. Or talking. Or moving and talking. Or something.

A crouching red shape shifted nearby.

**'It is the time of shadows. We should go now.'**

Andy yawned, stretched, sat up. She waggled her fingers. Still mauve then. Ah well. At least they didn't hurt so much.

'Now that was what you *call* alternative therapy.' Andy filled her lungs. 'Djora, you'd make a fortune in the West End.'

A deep grumbling sound, like a petrol driven street hammer being switched off, emanated from the crouching red form.

'There's no need to laugh.'

**'But you are so small, and pale, like fog. And yet your heart is as big as the mother sun. Your body cries out for nurturing. But your aura does not need it. You are an enigma, Andreaclare. An enigma without rules or consequence. As are all White Men.'**

Andy shook her head, patted her feet dry and snagged her socks.

'Well... er... right back atcha, I guess.'

The red shape unfolded to not quite double Andy's height.

**'We must leave this place. It is *their* time now.'**

'Their time?'

But Andy knew Djora was right. She could sense it. Feel it in the change of light, the quality of the air. Black flowers, stirring at the touch of an undetectible breeze, drank the light. The scent of pollen drifted through the caverns, a conversation as complex and sophisticated as any human interchange.

**'We may return to the pool when the Black Flowers permit.'**

An image filled Andy's head. Leaves curving to follow her movements. Petals unfolding with barely concealed intention. Black flowers, blooming in shadow.

'Yes indeedy. Time to book.'

Andy rose, followed Djora from the now barely lit cavern.

**'Do not look back.'**

*Roger that.*

Andy glanced at her hands again. The mauve colouration had faded. Now it was dry and powdery looking. Andy rubbed her palms together. The colour rubbed right off, just like dry skin. The warm breeze carried the drifting motes back into the cavern. Andy resisted turning. The image of a black flower unfolded in her head. Huge, velvet soft. Beckoning. Stamen uncoiling in inky clouds, like sea fern, billowing in unseen currents. Not currents of air, or water. Currents of *mind.* Of *memory.*

Of *time.*

Something else unfolded in her head. A different image. Not stamen. Hair.

Beatnik hair, sun–bleached.

Andy frowned.

Something sparked in her head. The spark bloomed. A black inferno.

Andy pushed past the Princess, ran the half kilometre back to Burroughs' home in minutes.

She found him in the main cave, talking with Carter. Without hesitation she marched up to him, grabbed him by the collar and yanked him to his feet. The low gravity helped but she could have easily managed it anyway.

'How long?' She demanded.

'I beg your–'

*'How long was his hair!'*

Burroughs gaped.

Andy frowned, dropped him, turned to Carter.

'Did you draw him? My brother? Is there a picture?'

There was just one, a thumbnail which Carter had made from Burroughs' description decades before. It lay in a display case in the museum gallery. Andy stared at it, feeling something huge and hopeful grab her heart, and *squeeze*.

She took out her phone, fumbled with the controls, was rewarded with a tiny blinking icon. *Recording.*

Burroughs, Carter and the Princess stared.

Andy frowned. 'Don't you get it? In this picture. He's got *really long hair.* My

brother doesn't have *really long hair.* It would take him a *year* to grow his hair that long.' Andy smacked herself on the forehead. 'Don't you *get* it? He's *not dead yet.* Not on his own time–line. He dies in the future. Your past, but his future. His future and mine. *I can save him.'*

Andy laughed out loud.

'And guess what? Quantum mechanics says there's no such thing as a paradox. So who cares if saving him creates an alternative universe? *He'll still be alive in mine!'*

Andy turned to Djora, fixed the Princess with an adoring expression.

'And as for you, you lanky lovely, I don't know what you did to me back there but I could kiss that gorgeous face of yours right here and now!'

**'Kiss?'** The Princess took a cautious half a step backwards, putting herself well out of arm's reach.

At the same time Carter and Burroughs stepped in front of the Princess, closing ranks as if to shield her, as ridiculous as that was given how much taller she was than they. The truth was they could barely have shielded her if she'd been sitting on the ground and they'd been standing on chairs dressed as hockey goalkeepers.

Andy was surprised and, if she was honest, faintly amused at the old–fashioned boy–moves. Then she noticed that both Burroughs and Carter had drawn their pistols, and suddenly the situation did not seem quite so amusing.

'… well... if I could reach high enough I mean...'

Andy backed off a little, her smile fading. The Princess' arms appeared from above and beside the two men; somehow the total number of weapons aimed her way doubled.

'... so, actually, you know what... let's just *not,* shall we?'

Backing away felt weird, but she knew what those weapons could do.

'Boys...' She raised her hands placatingly. '… and... *Princess.'*

Carter and Burroughs exchanged odd, slightly embarrassed glances – *haven't been here for a while,* their faces seemed to say – then looked up at the Princess. All three suddenly looked a little sheepish. Carter offered the tiniest shrug. Burroughs tilted his head and raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement. A moment later no weapons were pointing in Andy's direction. She gave it a moment to make sure the number wasn't going to increase unexpectedly, then sighed with relief.

'The problem,' Carter said quietly, 'Is that she has our memories. She knows about the Emperor, the Princess, the plan. She knows everything. She just doesn't know she knows. If the Senate finds out there's a plan to replace Tanta Sten... to end the war...'

'I beg your *pardon* Howard. I didn't *invite* you to my home. Should I have left you all to die?'

'No, of course not. But sharing memories...'

'If you hadn't crashed in a *maahes* nest...'

'I couldn't pick and choose where we crashed, Edgar. We *crashed.'*

Carter and Burroughs took a step apart. Andy stared from one to the other. They were like a couple of kids who suddenly remembered they once had a massive row and hadn't made it up yet.

The Princess reached out and scooped the two men into her gigantic hands, not

bringing them together but certainly preventing them from moving further apart. Andy studied the situation. Neither of the men seemed inclined to break the hold, even though something told Andy it would have been easy for them to do so. *They respect her. They totally respect her. And she knows it. Clever girl.*

'So where does that leave us? Tactically I mean?'

'You tell me. You're the *Sorceror.'*

'A title I didn't earn and never wanted.'

Carter was on the verge of responding angrily when the Princess intervened.

**'We do not choose our names. Destiny chooses them for us.'**

'Spoken like a true mystic.'

**'Enough! You are my friends and as friends I command you. Be calm or be silent. We all know what must be done.'**

'Edgar. You have friends among the green tribes. They can carry a message for us.'

'I do and they can.' Burroughs thought for a moment. '… whether they'll believe the Senate is preparing for genocide... that Djora might be able to stop it... whether they'll believe the Pharaoh is manipulating both – *all* – sides... that's something I can't predict. You know what the Greens are like.'

**'Each side has weaknesses, Edgar. Each side has strengths. You taught me that when I was but a child.'**

'You're *still* a child, Djora. You're barely a hundred and seventy. Your brother could be Emperor for centuries yet. And your fate will be far worse than a sound spanking if he ever finds out where you've been, what you've been plotting, and with whom.'

**'My - what is the White word? - my *brother* wants a war that will destroy this world.'**

'It's not his war. It's the Senate's. As utterly illogical as that is–'

'The Senate is *not* logical, Howard. The Senate is old and greedy and–' Burroughs stopped, shook his head. 'Things have changed. Our response must change too.'

Andy became aware Burroughs was looking at her with a strange expression. And this one *was* making her feel uneasy.

'Andy knows the Pharaoh. They're friends.'

Andy blinked; four pistols were aimed between her eyes.

Burroughs shook his head. 'This is not the way.' He placed one hand on the Princess's, his palm tiny against the long, jewel encrusted trigger–finger. To Andy's surprise the Princess gave way. Slowly Carter followed suit. Andy began to get the feeling she was out of her depth. *Way* out of her depth.

'Andrea. Andy. We have shared memories. I know you are a good person. You don't yet know the things your friend has done to the peoples of Maahes, the damage she has wreaked in the name of her friends, the Blue Men.'

**'The Blue Men are extinct!'**

'Evidence suggests that may change.' Burroughs voice suddenly held a strange tone. 'Reports suggest The Lost Pharaoh has returned to Maahes.'

'If it's true she'll try to bring them back. It will be genocide. Unless we stop her.'

'The only way to stop her is to kill her.'

**'The Lost Pharaoh cannot *be* killed–!'**

'Enough Djora! Arguing is pointless. We are faced with facts, not ghosts. One of them is standing right in front of us.'

Andy suddenly realised Burroughs meant her.

All eyes turned to her.

Burroughs sighed. 'We must return to Ferrohelios. In secret so the Emperor – or more importantly the Senate – will never know Djora has been attempting to contact the enemy. I'll reach out to any Green tribesmen we meet on the way. If we're not killed out of hand... we may have a chance to create something our own world never could... a lasting peace.'

There was a very long moment of silence. Carter broke it with a long exhalation followed by a thoroughly ungentlemanly curse.

'If we are to return in secret to Ferrohelios, there is only one route.'

**'The River of the Dead.'**

Was that fear in the Princess' voice?

Burroughs nodded.

Carter shot a meaningful glance Andy's direction. 'And this one?'

Burroughs studied Andy with the analytical gaze of a veteran gunslinger.

'It's trust her or kill her.'

'If we trust her we'll have to show her. The face of the enemy.'

**'She knows the face of the enemy. It is her own face.'**

'I agree. Showing her anything to do with blue memories is a risk.'

'She already *has* blue memories. She could act on them at any time.'

Andy suddenly felt like backing away – far *far* away – as fast as possible.

Burroughs nodded minutely. His expression suggested he'd reached a decision.

'We'll do it first. Before we reach the river. The Tree can decide.'

Andy put her hands on her head and squeezed. The whole box of frogs was just too deranged. 'Will you listen to yourselves? War? Genocide? The face of the enemy? A fate worse than *spanking?'* Andy tried unsuccessfully to control the hysterical tide of fear and anger flooding through her. 'River of the *Dead?* I mean – just for once can't something be called, *The Softly Bubbling Stream of Eternal Sunshine?* Or... I don't know, anything at all other than *dead!'*

Andy tailed off. Her hands dropped uselessly to her sides. Useless because the penny had – finally – dropped. All three were staring at her. For the first time she was able to recognise the same look on every face. The expression was fear. But not for themselves. Not even for her.

They weren't frightened *for* her.

They were frightened *of* her.

Because she knew *Erimem.*

The only person on the planet who could help save her brother's life, maybe Ibrahim's too. And *The Three Amigos* not only wanted to kill her, but were demanding Andy's help to do so.

**From the Account of Matthew Hansen**
**IV**
**The Destiny of Men**

Matt's first thought as the towering shieldstones marking the border of the big guy's tribal territory rose above the distant horizon was that there was a wall across the world and the desert was an ocean doing its absolute best to tear it down. His second thought, on realising the stones – easily five hundred meters high and many kilometres long – were in fact the gap–toothed remains of a city wall, was more prosaic.

'Well, shit a brick,' he told himself. 'Not a half–bat or a queen closer, but a whole, entire turd–baked brick.'

It was then that he had a second, more disturbing thought: he wasn't surprised.

Here he was within sight of a broken section of wall that could have wrapped around central London and still left room for the Docklands Light Airport – and *he wasn't surprised.*

The big guy, apparently, *was* the one who showed surprise.

The green giant sat down abruptly on the scrubby desert, ass to the father dune in a most disrespectful way, Matt noted, and uttered a wail of such complex articulation that it took Green Man and White a goodly while to divine its meaning.

The big guy was seeing his own home – through other eyes.

*Matt's* eyes.

Matt sighed, thinking back more than three weeks to the vicious brawl in the city of the Blue Men, the blue glass shards jammed into his face, the acid flashbacks that crashed his head–party with the Orwellian glee of gobby helmets conducting an illegal stop–and–search. He remembered the inside of his head somehow colliding with the inside of the big guy's; past and future getting mangled up together like dope fiends on a bouncy castle, a vision of other worlds, other lives, now barely divisible from his own.

Would those metaphorical gobby helmets survive here, he wondered, with all their allegorical anti–terrorist training? Or would they simply park themselves in the father dune and exert their authority until something *else* parked in the father dune exerted *its* authority – and ate them? Either way consumer rights would undoubtedly prevail, ha-ha.

And here was another thing: evolution had a way of exacting its own brand of consumerism where mutations were concerned. Life would weed out the undesirable freaks, just like it always did, returning them to sender for a full genetic refund without Matt having to expend a single erg of unnecessary effort. Even if the undesirable freaks wore shiny helmets and carried riot shields. Even if – and here Matt chuckled in nihilistic self–understanding – one of the undesirable freaks in question turned out to be Matt himself.

The chuckle became a truncated laugh at the unexpected thought of shiny sis observing from her usual lordly heights that it had taken being zapped to a whole other planet to get the idiot bro to smoke–up a little self–awareness.

Whatever. Shiny sis wasn't here; he *was*.

He reached up and offered a friendly tap to the big guy's knee. 'It's OK buddy,' he muttered. 'You're just feeling what I should be. Captain Jerkov's mind–meld goes both ways, apparently.'

The Moroccan chick, who had been marching steadily at her usual position several metres off to one side, now turned, offering a raised eyebrow and a questioning glance.

Matt clocked the look and shook his head sadly. 'You have a 3D flatscreen big enough to show American football actual size, that can beam you anywhere in time and space, and you don't know what a *mind–meld* is?' He shook his head, dismissing the massive improbability of this ironic happenstance with barely concealed amazement, then returned his attention to the big guy. 'Buddy, if you're having wacky–ass nightmares about history homework and shiny sis's sparkly eyeliner... all I can say is, soldier on, man. This too shall pass.'

If the big guy understood that Matt was attempting to fill a friend–request, he gave no sign. Matt shrugged, put both hands on the big guy's ass and boosted him upright. 'Upsy–daisy fella,' he offered. 'Long ways to go yet. 'Specially towing whatever *that* is.' Matt jerked a thumb back at the mum–truck–sized cube of blue glass the big guy had, since leaving the city, dragged on ropes made from some creeping desert plant across the father dune. On Earth the cube would have weighed more than a delivery truck. Here Matt could probably have picked it up and tossed it a casual half–mile without breaking a sweat. The big guy, however, seemed intent on

dragging it all the way home himself and had rejected all offers of help until Matt finally shrugged, offered a not–entirely scathing, 'It's your gollum, jerkoff,' and exercised his consumer right not to get involved.

The big guy spat clinging goo on his palms and renewed his grip on the ropes. He leaned into the weight and all three marched forward into the desert, towards the wall. Towards home and, Matt knew, the hope that Father and First Father still lived, and everything he – the big guy, rather – had suffered had not been in vain.

Black flowers bloomed briefly in the long furrow made by the blue glass cube but no–one noticed.

Matt stuck one foot in front of the other and felt it sink an inch into the desert sand. The city of blue glass was four days walk behind them and he felt like he'd been hodding bricks on a building site this whole time. He glanced back over his shoulder. Four days. They'd been walking four *days* and the city was still visible, rising like some shimmering desert mirage into the rose–quartz sky. It wasn't even on the horizon, man. Not even *close.* How big was this planet anyway? And was the entire 'hood a desert?

Matt uttered a sullen grunt and aimed a kick at a nearby pillar of rock. The rock was part of a spine–like ridge of blue–black stone with its roots buried deep in the father dune. The big guy had been circling ridges like this for more than a day and they weren't, Matt noticed, getting any smaller. Gossamer duneflies nested here in their millions, their rock–like towers rising tens of metres clear of the red–bronze scrub, swarming at every full–sun, barely visible even then. One dunefly was cute enough, Matt recalled, but a swarm could be deadly. Fortunately the nests would be long behind them by next full–sun. As his toe connected with the outcrop, the rock snapped off and a chunk the size of a car tyre rose in a long shallow arc that had it shrinking to a distant speck in seconds.

'Doesn't know his own strength.' Matt watched the splinter of rock tumble away through the pink sky until the shadow the big guy cast over him moved away and the heat from the sun returned. Then he started walking again, making sure to keep within the green giant's footprints wherever possible. The ground was compressed in the half–metre–wide depressions, and in the deep rut made by the block of blue glass he was dragging; harder, flatter, easier to walk on.

'I'll never bitch about council roadworks again.'

A rumbling enquiry came from nearby, and somewhere above his head.

' "What's a *road?*" ' Matt mimed a scathing double–take. 'Buddy are you high, and if so how in the name of all that's mighty do I get there?"

Matt didn't expect an answer and didn't get one. Right now, he didn't much care. Between the desert and the crazy green assassins, and the crazier blue–glass visions and the near constant disapproving looks from the Moroccan chick... well, let's just say getting bawled out for kicking cats into the canal was looking more like a happy place every minute. And – oh look – there was another one right now: disapproving glance, that was, from the Moroccan chick. What had he done wrong now?

As if he gave any kind of shit at all.

The Moroccan chick had been walking to one side for hours, paralleling the course set by the big guy, ignoring the rock or the more solid ground in the big guy's wake in favour of loose sand. She seemed to have no difficulty moving across it that Matt could detect and, honestly, this both cheesed him off and freaked him out. From time to time she would stop, even though she clearly wasn't tired; standing perfectly still, feet rooted in the sand, face tilted up to the sky, fingers spread to catch fine particles of sand lifted up by the hot breeze. She would stand like that for a short while, sand–wraiths swirling around her as if the desert itself was happy she was there, long enough to fall a ways behind but seemingly unconcerned she would lose her way. Watching her Matt felt like he was seeing someone who was happy to be home which, naturally enough, acted only to rub his fur ever more thoroughly in the wrong direction. Matt himself was just about ready to admit the day he ever went to the beach again was going to be a cold and snowy day in hell.

'Kicking rock is not tactically astute.' The Moroccan chick's voice, soft and abrasive as the desert sand, followed close on the heels of her disapproving look. 'When it lands, it will leave marks in the desert. The marks will point towards our trail. If more of the Green Men are hunting us, it will make us easier to find.'

Matt rolled his eyes and sighed. The Moroccan chick's voice brimmed with the same exact brand of authority that shiny sis reserved for her most pompass annoyasaurusing.

'This Lawrence of Arabia trip is getting old really fast,' he muttered under his breath.

'Complaining about the situation will not help – especially if the complaint invites an attack.'

Matt flushed – not just with the heat of the huge red sun. 'Man, don't be such a compound nobwit,' he grumbled. 'It's my party and I'll gripe if I want to.'

'Gripe all you want,' the Moroccan chick said. 'So long as you *act* sensibly.'

'And if I don't? Hands like that – I get the feeling you're not going to be spanking anyone real soon.'

Erimem lifted her hands and studied the burned skin of her palms. Matt briefly wondered how she got the burns, and what it cost her not to complain about them. Then common sense prevailed. Matt turned away without waiting for a reply. Who gave two shits what the Moroccan chick thought? Her *and* her burned hands.

Matt left the Moroccan chick tearing strips off her T–shirt to make bandages and skulked off in search of the big guy, finding him hunkered down in the father dune, eating sand. He was washing with the sand as well, Matt saw, but mainly eating it. Matt found a perch on the huge block of blue–glass, nothing else immediately convenient being available, and watched for a while, occasionally letting his eyes drift into the patterns of light thrown by the glass across the billowing dunes. Red sunlight. Blue glass. There was, Matt thought, a certain fishtankyness to it. All he needed was a bunch of clownfish, some weed and (*damn*, what wouldn't he give for a nice fat) cone-shell anemones, and he could have been right back at home the day his dad set up the aquarium. Matt had been five. Mum had argued about the cost. She won the battle with dad but lost the war to the fish; in the end feeding and talking

with them more than anyone. Matt remembered watching the fish apparently eating sand, then spitting it out again. Happy days. He couldn't remember many that followed.

A shadow fell across his face. The big guy had noticed he was being watched, and now he ambled up to Matt, spat in one spade–like hand, reached down and rubbed the spit into the wounds on Matt's face.

'No, it's– no, mate, seriously, I'm telling you I'm– *oh man, you slimed me.'*

Matt tried to wipe the muck off but only succeeded in rubbing it in. It was stickier than superglue and stinkier than cat sick. But he had to admit, it did make his face feel better. He wondered why the Moroccan chick had refused to let the big guy slime her hands. Then he wondered why he bothered wondering. It was *so* something the shiny would do.

The big guy bent down to inspect his handiwork. One vast eye regarded Matt with tremendous interest – which made Matt scowl. Before he could respond with an appropriately dismissive remark, the big guy produced a sound that was as close to a train wreck as Matt ever wanted to hear. All six hands clutching his belly he doubled over with mirth. Matt rolled his eyes. 'Seriously? You're laughing at me now? Is there anything else I can do to amuse you? Rip my head off at the neck so you can stick big green boogers down the soggy stump?'

The big guy's chuckle became the pneumatic wheeze of dustcart refuse crushers. One hand – the hand still layered in slime – left his belly and swung towards the top of Matt's head, with the clear intention of imparting a brotherly rub.

And *that,* Matt decided, was quite enough of *that,* FYI.

He reached up, grabbed one of the big guy's fingers and stopped the movement of his arm dead. He held it for a beat, to show that he could, then gently pushed it away. The big guy took the slapdown with absolute equanimity. His wheezy chuckle slipped down a couple of octaves until Matt felt his ribs being tickled as if by the finest quality nightclub bass bins.

'Come on, dude,' he muttered. 'I get enough of this shit from shiny sis and Queen Emoji back there.' Matt jerked a thumb towards the Moroccan chick, who was studying them with an expression he imagined would fit very well on the face of any long–suffering mother watching her idiot children responding to some imagined slight by throwing handfuls of wet Weetabix at each other. 'We're booking.' Matt shifted his grip on the big guy's arm and led him away. For all the good it would do. There was without a shadow of doubt naff-all privacy out here in the desert. But Matt urged the big guy to sit and then hunkered down in his shadow. 'You ever get the feeling your erstwhile mother's come back to haunt you?'

**'Whaaaaghhhht is-ss-ss motherrrr–rrr–rr?'**

Matt frowned. 'You know. Mum. Mother.' He adopted a slightly lecturing pose – difficult when hunkering, granted, but– 'She from whose loins you sprangeth.'

**'Loiggggghhhhhhhhnsss–ss–s?'**

'Not to be confused with *lions.'* Matt waited a beat for a reaction. 'Y'know what? Never mind.' Matt cleared his face, smiled brightly, and started over. 'So you green guys eat sand then?'

The big guy rubbed his belly. **'Sand good.'** He snagged a handful of sand roughly the size of a sack of potatoes and held it out to Matt. His jaws widened invitingly. Matt guessed he was smiling. He eyed the long, curved tusks warily.

'Yeah, ummm–mm... no thanks, big guy. Not my thing, you grok?'

**'Not thing.'** The big guy shrugged – all shoulders – and gulped down the sand himself.

'Waste not want not, hey?' Matt chuckled. 'Happy for ya, big guy. Not for me though. Chinese is cool. Or a hot Indian. That's bad–ass.'

The big guy turned Matt's words over, rumbling in what seemed to Matt like a thoughtful way. **'You eat ass that is bad?'** He said eventually. **'Why not eat good ass?'**

Matt opened his mouth to issue a knee-jerk denial, then stopped, closed it again, shuddered. 'Or if shiny sis is cooking, y'know, some kind of health-related fashion-trash or other. Yoghurt. Tofu. Veggie... I dunno... *stuff.'*

The big guy rumbled with volcanic mirth.

Matt waited; the rumblings subsided to the merely bone-shaking. 'And again... never mind. Just don't think I'm a cannibal 'cos I eat... y'know... dead living things.'

The big guy rubbed one tusk thoughtfully. **'How you get energy from eat anything *alive?'*** His expression indicated to Matt he thought the idea was frankly preposterous. Matt supposed there was no reason why he shouldn't, this being his planet after all.

**'Here only Red Men feed on energy from living things. Red Men, and Yellow Men. And Plant Men. And... beasts, like *maahes.* And–'**

Matt put up one hand to forestall the list, which was beginning to seem like homework.

Obligingly, the big guy assumed a position of amiable silence.

The momentary quiet left space for azure thoughts to take up residence in Matt's head. 'Just as well it's a short list or everyone would be able to glassdream,' he said without thinking. He didn't need the big guy's surprised reaction to know he was right. The *rightness* of it sang a blue song in his head, clear as any church bell.

**'Green Men did not know that White Men glassdream.'**

'Something new every day, am I right?' It wasn't really a question. Matt did not know how else to respond. Falling back on *The Itsy Bitsy Book of Classy Clichés* felt wrong but it was all he had so it would have to do.

**'You are in my glassdream. I am in yours.'**

Staring at Matt as he spoke, the big guy clearly had every intention of diving down a rabbit hole of ever more biblical girth. Matt, on the other hand, was about to dismiss the whole line of conversation as, like, *too freakadelic for words, Scoob,* when a distant whining sound rose from the desert beyond the jagged folds of blue–black rock. At the first hint of sound the big guy bounced to his feet so hard a wave of sand knocked Matt flat on his back.

Fast as the big guy was, the Moroccan chick was faster. By the time Matt had struggled to his feet, bounced half dozen uncontrolled metres into the air, fallen back to earth and regained his footing, she had covered the distance between them, passed

between them like a whirlwind, and was now scaling the nearest ridge faster than an ibex strung out on Popeye's quality spinach.

Matt struggled to his feet for a second time and watched her go. He knew why she was running, what she was running towards. The sound of it was buried deep in the blue, nested in his head.

*Nested.*

Like the *duneflies.*

*Kicking rocks is not tactically astute.*

Wise words, as it turned out, and now he added to them. *Especially when the rock in question was not just a rock but also part of a gossamer nest.*

A nest that would still be hibernating if he hadn't stuck his size ten boot in.

Matt turned, seeking confirmation, but the big guy was already gallumphing up the ridge to join the Moroccan chick. Before he could reach the top, she passed him coming down. Needing no further encouragement the big guy turned in her wake, leaping from the rock back to the dunes. They landed seconds apart, in clouds of fine sand particles, one Moroccan–chick–sized, one quite a bit bigger. As they did so the rose–hued sky above the rocks began to sparkle dramatically. At the same time, the whine rose to a damn–near unbearable shriek.

Seconds later the swarm was on them.

Matt hunkered down on a ridge of rock surrounded by scrubby rust–coloured desert, staring at the blue–glass city but seeing only the dismembered remains of their attackers, the kaleidoscopic charnel house they'd made of one of the city's mirrored plazas barely an hour before. Lowering his gaze, he scooped up handfuls of gritty sand and began to scrub blue–green *(blood it was someone's actual)* goop from his face and clothes.

Incredible. In*credible.*

Was it only hours before that he'd been getting drilled for kicking cats in the canal, stoking up a monster cone, checking out the Tull with Mallory, and wondering whether *A–17–U1 Oumuamua* was a sixty million year old spacecraft or merely an interstellar asteroid on collision course with naff–all but infinity?

Of course, dumped up to his chin in the here–and–now, it was odds–on that Matt himself was a further away from Earth than *Oumuamua* had ever been – or was ever likely to be. 'Far out, man.' Confirming the thought in tones of quiet amazement somehow seemed like the right thing to do. And why not? Any way you fried it this fish was moot.

Yesterday had never seemed so far away.

The feeling shifted, swung away as Mallory's face rose suddenly in his mind, smooth as peppermint, cold as a snowman's heart. Was she still parked where he'd left her in the kid's playground by the Moroccan chick's pad, rocking back and forth on the swing in that studied, posey kind of way she had, superglued to her smart phone like all the rest, digging on Robbie yapping on about Kurt yapping on about lithium or something equally valueless? How much time had passed for her if she was? Was she *bored–now?* If she was would she follow him into the *upside down –*

or risk a fingernail texting him a suitably cutting *FU2, FYI* before swanning off to stranger things? Maybe she'd summon a bunch of her cool mates so they could, like, *hang out man;* point and laugh when he finally staggered back out of the portal to *Planet Fruitloop.*

Her face blue–shifted suddenly, accelerating towards him before receding just as suddenly into a kid's playground filled with aberrant delusion.

He blinked, rubbed his eyes; a stinging mix of sand and goop found its way in there.

*Shit.*

He rubbed again, blinked again; tears a fractured kaleidoscope over the fool's paradise dementia.

*The Moroccan chick: slashing at her own face with a blue–glass sword. Shiny sis: riding a rock raft down a river of sand, through half–million year old ruins, hunted by yellow flyers with blue–glass ray–guns. A shattered moon: plunging to earth, destroying a continent, bringing new life to a desiccated sea–bed. Shiny sis screaming from two mouths. The red navy armada: a thousand ships sailing violent skies, under fire from green marauders. Sandragons spitting sandblaster death. Gossamer wings torching flesh and bone. Trapped in the cavern maze with a living glass mindkiller and a green assassin red assassin father dune Ferrohelios shieldstone wall squarecave lost moroccan pharaoh children's playground shrieking cat assgravy Camberwell cact–ass shiny–carrot mum gone dad gone shiny gone frenzied army of living fulgarite hurtling towards him, feeding, feeding, FEEDING–*

Matt reeled from the force of the visions. He scraped the stinging goop from his eyes and face, shook his head, pushed aside the delirious phantasms with a fresh string of briefly entertaining invective. He swore at the father dune and mother sun. At the Moroccan chick and shiny sis. At a particularly offensive–looking bristledart bush.

Mallory, shiny sis, the Madness Christmas Tour, it all went away in the end. Or started to anyway. Enough so he could begin to ignore it at least. In its place a face loomed, swimming slowly into focus. The Moroccan chick, painted red by the father dune. Red. Concerned. The face was joined by another. Larger, and altogether greener, it also displayed an expression of concern.

'What?' Matt choked out aggressively. 'You never seen a guy covered in lumpy blue slime before?'

Concern drained from the faces; they drifted away.

'Yeah, that's right,' Matt muttered, feeling somehow aggrieved. 'Float–on, baby, just walk–on–by. Nothing to see here but early–onset acid–casualty *numero uno.* Face–paint–disaster–patient–zero. King of the Hill of Shiny Sherbert Shitballs–' Matt skidded to a stop, vocally speaking, as an actual thought shouldered its way through the walloping great family pack of quality–street profanity gumming up his head. 'Hey big guy,' the thought aired itself with supreme lack of effort. 'Who were those goons trying to kill us anyway?'

The big guy grumbled just about loud enough to rattle Matt's teeth then stood up, punched six pile–driver dents into the nearest dune, before mooching off to mash up

some rocks.

'Okay, well...' Matt felt the world slide, ice–blue, around inside his head. 'Kill you, kill your dad, huh, is that how it is?'

*Crunch. Thud.*

Matt shrugged. 'Or not.'

In lieu of a satisfactory (or any) reply, blue thoughts flooded Matt's head. Were the attackers Green men from another tribe, trying to take the Big Guy's blue glass bounty for themselves? Were they *Arsenium* killers; master assassins with the power to invade another's mind, control another's actions? If so why? And who would have hired them? Red men? Yellow? The Lost Pharaoh - whoever *that* was?

Azure *otherness* ebbed and flowed, and finally drained from the space behind Matt's eyes. His vision was clearing but he couldn't see the sense of it – yet. But he would, he knew, before long.

With that thought the world shifted focus again, sliding around this planet's wacky colour wheel until blue became red. The the deep crimson of mother sun, the dun–ochre of father dune; the lighter tones of the Moroccan chick, who Matt thought seemed to be spending an inordinate amount of time staring at him with something akin to concern these days.

'Something I can blue for you?' Matt muttered irritably. *'Do* for you, I mean.'

The Moroccan chick studied Matt minutely but did not speak.

'So here we are.' Matt scraped blue slime out of his hair. 'The weird part of Youtube. And have I *ever* wanted to punch something so hard.'

The Moroccan chick glanced from Matt to the big guy, still apparently intent on enacting Matt's wish against a bunch of what by now was little more than loose scree. Her expression suggested there might be more similarities between Matt and the big guy than previously suspected. Matt sighed tiredly. If she was thinking they were both loners with the apparently endless capacity to cheese off their family beyond measure while assuming the role of being one hundred percent alienated by same, well, honestly, she wasn't altogether so far from the truth.

The big guy threw another punch; another boulder bit the dust. The Moroccan chick ducked some fast moving shrapnel and Matt followed suit, not quite fast enough to avoid acquiring some additional scrapes and bruises. He sighed with disgust.

'Just, *please,* don't be helicopter–mum number three.'

Later that week the sun set.

Matt regarded the wide, luminous ghost laid low along the back of the father dune and sighed. He was scrunched down on a wide shallow dome of blue–black rock thinking about night, and what it meant here. Two weeks without the sun – but not without light, it seemed. Instead of the rose–quartz sky there was a much paler band of luminescence encircling the sky, shading to a dark purple the higher he looked. Stars poked out of the darkness there. But they weren't the stars of Earth. They were red, and they were few, and they clustered together low on the horizon for comfort. He felt something about that, though he wasn't entirely sure what it was. But

not a good feeling, anyhow.

As if the sky itself was *scared.*

A movement beside him caught his attention. The Moroccan chick was adjusting her position. When had she parked up? She settled into place, following his gaze up to the stars. She watched them for a while. Her face, a pale ghost of itself, just like the sun, was utterly unreadable.

'Do you know what I miss the most when I look up at the sky?'

Matt waited.

'The Nile.'

Matt tried to think of something to say that was appropriate to his absolute level of *couldn't give a shit.*

'So... ah... the Nile's not *in* the sky.'

The Moroccan chick favoured him with the kind of look his teachers regularly bestowed upon the sadly under-educated. Matt felt his temper rise. Like shiny sis the Moroccan chick *said–and–did* in imperatives and absolutes. Everything she said made him angry. Everything she *didn't* say made him angry. Everything she did, well, *ditto,* man. In fact he was just about *cheesehenged* with how genuinely and absolutely annoying it actually was.

The Moroccan chick moved minutely, shifting her gaze back in his direction, favouring him with the briefest of looks. Her expression suggested she had read his thoughts as easily as any Sunday rag cartoon and found within them just about the same level of merit.

He sighed. 'There's no river, no Nile. Just stars, man. Just...' He struggled to find the right words. Something appropriately nihilistic. '… shit, I don't know, god's atomic apples.' She said nothing so he added, 'All just waiting to fall.'

The Moroccan chick sat in silence while Matt tried to summon the motivation to bounce. He badly wanted to check out of freakweed hotel but like that greek chick – Andromeda was it? – some vindictive chump had him chained to a rock. It was something important, it had been on his mind for a while now and, honestly, he'd be taxed senseless if he felt like being tactful about it.

'So, anyway, this bling of yours,' he waggled the finger on which the ring he'd acquired at hers was still firmly glued. 'Can get us home, right? So why don't we just flip a bee–atch?'

'A beach.' She looked around, as if for rubber rings or a sailing club.

Matt sighed again. 'No man, A *bitch.* A euie. As in, like, turn–your–car–around and just not be here anymore.'

*Nada.*

'Go *home,'* Matt finally translated – pointedly.

'You would abandon Andy and Ibrahim.' True to form it wasn't a question.

'I didn't mean that,' Matt said quickly. 'I didn't mean leave them.' He flushed. 'We could come back. Get kitted out and come back for them. That's all... that's what I meant.' Matt tailed off. Even as the words came out he was aware of how shitty they sounded. Bruce Almighty himself would've had trouble preparing for... he stared around at the sand and sky, the cold, remote stars... whatever their current Hubble–

*FUBAR* was. 'Iron's precious here, right? It's their gollum. We could nip home, come back rich, and … yeah, with guns... from, I don't know, a sport store, or something. Or, yeah, one of your los– one of your guys is a Special, right? And you're all about the tactics and shit. So. That's a plan, isn't it?'

'It would be a good plan,' the Moroccan chick said slowly. 'If it had an objective. We don't know that Andy and Ibrahim are even alive, much less in need of rescue. And there's another thing.' She waggled her own ring–finger in imitation of Matt. 'The rings did not bring us here. If we tried to use them to return they would not work. We would be lost in time and space. Perhaps forever. I...' she hesitated. 'I do not completely understand how they work.' She hesitated again. 'They're not really *my* rings.'

Matt frowned. *How–The–Magician's–Nephew–now?* 'I don't get it. You skyped them?' He tried – unsuccessfully – to square this thought with the idea that the Moroccan chick was besties with the boundless and inexhaustibly honest shiny.

There was no answer from the woman sitting next to him. She was looking back up at the mother sky, her face pale in the light from those strange constellations; *the Xorat, the Dagger, the Lost Pharaoh.* Feeling *the lack of the Nile*. Her admission did not seem to be one of weakness. But no adult had ever been honest with him before, not when it really mattered anyway; from mum and dad to the teachers at school to shiny sis – though she hardly counted – and it felt weird. *Weird like a beard on a baby besmeared*, not to put too fine a point on it. And how was he supposed to react to that? To her? Did she respect him? Hate him? Did she care at all? For that matter why did *he* care? It wasn't like he owed her shit. *Keep your head down and get off the field in one piece.* Was it dad who'd told him that or some other Z–grade ass–o–naut? Matt couldn't remember and didn't much care. As previously stated, none of those losers were *here.*

'Look man, whatever. You beamed us down here, why can't you beam us up again?'

The Moroccan chick turned over Matt's words, attempting, he thought, to divine their meaning. Her momentary delay brought a tiny smile to his lips.

'I didn't bring us to this place.' Was that a crack in the Moroccan chick's perfectly even tone? 'Someone else did that.'

What *was* that tone? Fear? Anger? A promise of payback that momentarily stemmed even Matt's ever–present tide of *no–shits–left–to–give*–edness? Whatever it was, Matt didn't care. 'Back in the tomb? Sure *looked* like you.' *And if the woman had been a few years older, she was still as hot.* Matt clamped down on the thought. No *way* he was going to fan–crush on shiny sis's alpha loser. He'd rather be the ass at an ass–kicking competition – he'd rather be the elephant–sized ass with a target for a birthmark at an ass–kicking contest.

'She did not look like me. She was old, and–'

The Moroccan chick shut up suddenly and Matt got the feeling he'd accidentally tossed some warm and lumpy ass–gravy closer to the fan than he'd planned. Well good. Maybe some of it would even stick when she was done spraying it around. He waited for whatever fountainous wisdom would pour forth next but the silence

between them just stretched out more and more uncomfortably. Matt pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged them. Not for warmth, it wasn't cold. Just to feel something. Something from home. Something *normal.*

'I asked the big guy if he would show me how to glassdream,' Matt said eventually, just to break the silence. 'Properly, I mean, not like that waccy–baccy mind–meld.'

The Moroccan chick said thoughtfully, 'Glassdreaming would be a tactical advantage.'

'Yeah well, you know what he said? "You are very *small."* That's what he said. "Glassdreaming is very *big*. And you are very *small."* ' Matt sighed disgustedly. 'He sounded *concerned.'*

The Moroccan chick nodded slowly. 'You are much alike, you and... *jeju*.'

'*Jeju* isn't his name. He'll only have a name if he survives the father dune. If he makes it home from Argelium with his father's face intact.'

'Argelium.'

'The city of the Blue Men.' Matt could see clarification was needed. 'The place we just trashed last week.'

The Moroccan chick favoured him with a curious look. No. Not curious. Something else. Something... was she assessing him? Even *appraising* him? She'd called him a warrior. And she was always hooting on about tactics and shit.

Was she working out how to *weaponize* him?

Matt was still turning this frankly disconcerting thought over when the Moroccan chick said, 'I've been watching you play. It's very interesting.'

'Play?' Matt scowled and stood up. 'Screw *you,* Sandpit Sue.'

The Moroccan chick stood up too – far more easily than Matt had. All her movements were the same, he realised. Lean. Minimal. *Spartan.* As if every expenditure of effort was finely calculated, a commitment made only when all other factors had been weighed and found wanting. *Tactical.*

'When I come from only the very young play the way you do. Reaching out into the world, striking so hard at things they don't understand just to see what happens, to see if those things will break or strike back. Testing the world. Their place within it. This behaviour... just doesn't happen anywhere else in nature. Only people do it. Only us.'

Matt stared. Was she insulting him now?

'I've killed people your age – and younger.' Her stare met his with a frank openness that – almost – took the sting out of her words. 'In my world people your age are soldiers, slaves; politicians, traders; fathers, mothers. You would be an adult there, and would behave accordingly.'

Matt blinked.

'If not... death would find you soon enough, by my hand or another's.'

Matt's expression hardened. 'Says Nefertiti, Queen of the Desert.'

The Moroccan chick smiled faintly, as if she knew something Matt didn't. Well, maybe that was true, Matt never claimed to know everything. But one thing he did know was this: she was rubbing his fur against the grain – again.

'You know,' he said quietly. 'I'm getting the feeling that murder is a perfectly acceptable solution to my problems, due to anyone and everyone in my life being so *inexpressibly annoying.'*

The Moroccan chick offered a sympathetic shrug. 'Your sister would probably say, "I get that a lot." ' She shifted her position to a crouch. 'Have you ever been to Lake Nasser?'

'No, man, but I wish I was there now. At least I could jump a flight home.' Matt sighed. 'If I had any cash at all, I mean.' It suddenly occurred to Matt how prodigiously unprepared he was for the Plan 9 interplanetary *FUBAR* in which he currently found himself. He bit the bullet and sat back down. 'What are we going to do here, man? Starve to death in the desert? I dunno about you but I can't just eat sand like matey over there.' Matt jerked his hand over the ridge to a hollow in the dunes where the big guy was meditating, google–mapping, *contemplating his non–existant navel* – call it what you will – to find the best route home.

The Moroccan chick turned over Matt's words with sudden – and far too much – interest.

'What *now!'*

*'Are* you hungry?'

'Not as such.' Matt turned the thought over. 'Must be the sea air. Ha–ha.'

The Moroccan chick was quiet for a while, then said, 'Lake Nasser is not by the sea.'

Matt shrugged dismissively. 'Hence *lake.'*

'I travelled to Nasser last year. There were temples there when I was a child. My grandfather built them, all along the valley. There hadn't been a lake there then, of course. When I returned the buildings were gone. I thought the desert had taken them. Three thousand years is a long time. But then I realised the truth. The temples I'd played in when I was a child were lost when the Egyptian government built the Aswan dam and flooded the valley. I found out later some of them had been relocated to museums. I visited one. Just one.' She sighed. 'The ghosts of my family drove me away.'

'I want to sympathise,' Matt muttered under his breath. 'Really I do.'

If the Moroccan chick heard his words, she seemed to take them at their precise face value. 'I have never spoken to anyone from your century of my belief in the *duat* – you would call it the mirroring of Heaven on Earth. Heaven. That's where I thought I was when I first came to your time. But the trials are wrong. I fail them every day. Your world is not heaven. Just part of a pattern that will never be complete... the bones of a lost civilisation, never to be rebuilt as my fathers once hoped. The mirror of heaven is broken, you see. It can never be made whole.' She fell silent for a long while. 'Farīd ud–Dīn was right.'

'Farad who, now?'

'You would know him as Attar of Nishapur.'

'Uh... nope. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't.'

The Moroccan chick's eyes narrowed critically. 'When I come from a tutor would be flogged for failing so miserably in his duty of education.'

'Wow. So grownup.'

'Farīd ud–Dīn was a Sufi poet and hagiographer who, when required by the King of Persia to formulate a single quote that would be accurate at all times and in all situations, replied, *this too shall pass.'*

'And in five words or less. Colour me impressed.'

'My grandfather built those temples in the full knowledge that they would last forever. Farīd ud–Dīn and the Egyptian government proved him wrong.' She thought for a moment and then added, 'The destiny of men...'

'… is to be assholes? Don't blame me, man, it's not *my* Egyptian government.'

'No, of course not. Sometimes I forget.'

Matt shifted uncomfortably. The hands on the krazee–klock were showing less than one minute to midnight. He started to rise but a thought stopped him. 'You said, "when," ' he mused. 'That *is* what you said, right? "*When* I come from." When – not *where.'*

'In fact I said it twice.' The Moroccan chick drew her knees up to her chest, just as Matt had done earlier, then wrapped her arms around them. Matt watched the play of muscle under her hoodie sleeves and found himself considering the level of damage she might be capable of inflicting if her hands *weren't* bandaged. Well. He'd already caught a glimpse of that spectacle, hadn't he? Offing the walking dead in the tomb; ripping that *Arsenium* assassin's head clean off back in the blue city. Tip of the iceberg, he suspected. A rush of cold air tumbling off the rocks made the hairs on his arms stand on end. Just his shitty luck. Stuck ass–first in the *upside–down* with a Xena wannabe who gave every sign of flipping her stainless steel lid right off the saucepan.

'Don't pull a Tom Cruise on me, man. Oprah would not dig it.'

*Nor, for that matter, would shiny sis.*

The Moroccan chick stared at him then, and Matt found he had suddenly acquired the sensation of staring down from the ragged edge of a very high cliff.

'The last man of fighting age who disrespected me lost both hands before he died,' she said mildly.

Matt raised an eyebrow.

'And soiled himself.'

Matt shook his head. 'I'm not dissing you, man. I'm just saying. I don't think this is the kind of place you want to be losing your shit in.' *Or anyone else's for that matter.*

He drew his knees up to his chest and there they sat, for all the world like a pair of *FUBAR* bookends, staring up at someone else's stars as hot thermals from the father dune wound up into the cooling sky.

After a while it began to rain sand. The particles were very fine and smelled like paprika.

The Moroccan chick turned over Matt's words. After a while, she said, 'I will not be losing my shit, Matthew,' she said eventually. 'And if you lose yours, I will help you find it again.'

'For real?' Matt choked down a bitter laugh. 'You'd be the first.'

When the dunefly attack began, the thought uppermost in Matt's mind had been, *what's the fuss about?* That had been less than a minute ago. Things were major–league embuggered now.

The duneflies weren't that large – barely the size of a dragonfly – and they shimmered in the same way that dragonflies did, except that here the colours produced by the prismatic effects of their crystal bodies and three sets of wings was concentrated around the red end of the visible spectrum. As Matt remembered, one gossamer was pretty enough, but a swarm could be deadly. That was because the energy emitted from their wings and bodies didn't stop at visible light.

The swarm killed by ultraviolet radiation.

The first inkling Matt had that things were going bad was when he batted at the clouds of bugs surrounding them. His skin tingled – then stung. He screeched and yanked back his hand. The skin was peeling, as if he'd caught a bad dose of sunburn.

*Shit.*

Before he could react further, the swarm was pressing even closer, thousands – maybe tens of thousands – of bugs forming a hollow dome that contracted rapidly, pressing close around him, tracking his movements, focusing ever greater quantities of energy on him.

'Oh for–' Matt could not complete the sentence. As he opened his mouth bugs swarmed in, choking him. In desperation he jumped, immediately losing sight of the big guy and the Moroccan chick in the shimmering swarm. He jumped five metres, straight up, but it did no good. The swarm could move faster than he could and they simply kept pace, englobing him. Worse, with no leverage against the ground, Matt was helpless to alter his trajectory. All he could do was curl into a ball, protecting – or trying to protect, anyway – his exposed face and hands as much as possible while choking up those bugs he hadn't swallowed and holding his breath until, long moments later, he slammed back into the ground with a thud that hurt about as much as he imagined a rugby tackle would.

The satisfaction he felt at the sensation of crushing a thousand or so bugs between his body and the ground was immediately pushed aside by disgust at the brittle *crunching* noise the things made as they squashed. It sounded like frying bacon. Or was that his skin? The shriek of the swarm and his own shrieks of pain merged into a horrific maelstrom. The thought entered Matt's head that he might actually die here. The shock of it paralysed him, and the swarm pressed even closer. He closed his eyes. Covered his ears, found them filled with bugs, choked back a further scream.

This was not good. Not good at all.

They were all over him, crawling all over him, shrieking, burning–

Matt struggled to rise. If he stayed here he would die. He had to move. Right now. It was all he had. He straight–armed himself upright and began to run, faster, faster. The swarm kept pace. He ran, tripped, fell, rolled, smashing through dune and rock; scrambled upright, ran again. *Shitshitshit.* Matt increased his speed until he could barely feel the ground beneath his feet, until the air itself was a wall pressing hard against his face and chest. He ran.

Slowly... *slowly...* he began to draw clear of the swarm.

And then, as suddenly as switching on a light, they were gone, and he was bathed in daylight. Mother sun arched above his head, and two black ugly moons, and the shock of light against his face after the shrieking darkness was like running into a brick wall.

He gasped, collapsed, skidded along a high dune and finally crashed to a halt against a sharp ridge of blue–black rock. He clawed and thrashed in the sand, then jack–knifed, puking broken bugs until his throat burned as violently as his skin.

After this he lay still for a while, his vision fuzzy, edged with black. Eventually his sight finally cleared. He waited until he'd stopped sicking up stray bugs, then struggled to his feet. He looked around for the big guy and the Moroccan chick. Nothing doing. Even the swarm was gone, taking with it his tracks in the sand, wiping clean all traces of his panicked flight as they flew away. There was nothing around him as far as he could see but desert.

Father dune. Mother sun.

He was alone.

And lost.

*Shit.*

Matt summoned a curse he'd once overheard his mother make his father promise never to use in front of the kids again. He had no idea where he was. No idea how to get home. And his skin, man. His *skin.* His hands and the exposed parts of his wrists were smothered in horrid yellow blisters. The skin was peeling there, watery fluid leaking out, mixed with traces of blood. The pain was excruciating. The pain extended upwards. Matt stifled the thought of what his face must look like. He needed to treat his wounds. But he had nothing to dress them with, nothing to make bandages from, no way of tearing his shirt – he could barely move his fingers, let alone grip anything.

Too much.

Too freaking, *much*.

He hunkered down in the shadow of the rock, trying to decide what to do. He wondered if the big guy and the Moroccan chick were even alive. But mostly he just swore. An endless, useless, torrent of invective which just made his throat even more sore than it was from sicking up the bugs he'd swallowed. Even talking aloud hurt the skin around his mouth and cheeks.

Eventually he shut up because even the sound of his own voice was rubbing him the wrong way. He needed quiet. He needed to think. But think of what?

Exhaustion flooded Matt's body. He *couldn't* think. Couldn't *move.* He slept.

Close by the sand shifted, funnelled; the desert fell away.

Living fulgarite jacked itself clear of the dunes.

Glass limbs thudded closer.

The *maahes* fed.

*–slashing at her own face with a–*

*–screaming from two throats–*
*–riding a rock raft down a–*
*–shattered moon falling–*
*–red ships blue fire–*
*–green assassin–*
*–glass killer–*
*–feeding–*
*–feeding–*
*–FEEDING–*

Matt awoke, shrieking.

Mind gone, he punched upwards, blistered hands smashed up into the feeding *maahes,* ripping it apart, scattering lumps of torn glass across the ground, as blue lightning cracked and pulsed and bled into the desert scrub. The glass debris burned, fused, cooled clear; whatever force had animated the creature now utterly dispersed. The father dune had reclaimed its own. All that remained was a scattter of glass trash and three blue crystals, six sided, double points, perfect prisms. Two were broken; Matt snagged the other without really knowing why. It was the just right size to fit into his palm. He stared into the azure depths for an uncertain time then, with some difficulty, shoved it into his pocket. Why he did this he couldn't say. And honestly he didn't care either. It was something to do. To break the monotony of the endless screeching pain.

Matt clambered upright. He stood, limbs rigid, shuddering, glaring at the *maahes*–shattered present but seeing only past and future, kaleidoscope time, broken and scattered, the pattern incomprehensible.

No. Not incomprehensible. Not *quite.*

He turned, stumbled back to the rock, levered a large slab of it up, flipped it over, ignoring the pain from his hands, let it crash back to the ground.

Matt peered closer.

Blue. It had to be blue. Or else violet. Blue–violet. Or maybe–

*There.*

Matt scraped lichen from the underside of the rock, shoved handfuls of it into his mouth and chewed, spitting the nauseating pulp back onto his hands, rubbing it in, ignoring the burn, waiting for the pain to fade.

Nothing. The remedy taught by his First Father failed.

His hands spasmed, the pain shooting up his arms.

He scraped more lichen, chewed, spat, rubbed.

Same result. A bargain bucket of bugger–all.

Why hadn't the goop numbed his–

*Of course.*

Clear as day, the answer to his question brought no comfort.

Not his memory. Not his spit.

*The big guy's.*

Hours and days unrolled, a slow tidal swell. Time paced its endless cage. Matt felt like an animal in a zoo. Floor made of sand and scrub, bars made of sky and wind and pain and fear.

Father dune and mother sun, an inescapable prison.

He wondered if he should call for help. Memories of the things that could be hunting nearby in the father dune stopped him. Sound did not travel here. Sound was proximal. Sound and vibration. They were his enemies. Mother sun, a swollen giant, crawled across the sky, higher, higher. Soon it would be full–sun. The duneflies would emerge in their millions to swarm and hunt, feeding on any living thing that crossed their path. There would be no escape then. He had to find the others. But he could barely walk. And he had no idea in which direction to move. Were the others looking for him? He couldn't believe they weren't. But they'd never find him. Not on the father dune.

They might find his bones.

His skin peeled. He sweated blood.

The pain in his hands and face got worse. Much worse.

He closed his eyes but didn't sleep. Couldn't sleep. There was movement everywhere, from the sighing of wind in the rocks to the rasp of sand in the thorny scrub. Any of the sounds could herald the approach of something hunting him. Overhead the sun crawled through the sky. Distant storms clung blackly to the vast horizon, the dry clouds swollen with blue lightning, jagged azure spears lashing against the desert, planting living fulgarite among the mesas and buttes. *Maahes* that would grow and live and hunt and *kill.*

Should he risk moving, trying to retrace his steps? (But he couldn't see his steps.) Or should he remain where he was, in the shelter of rock, and hope to be found? (But more likely die.) Should he make a fire? Good luck on *that* count, without matches. Wait. He had a Bic, didn't he? Matt searched among his pockets for the glasses case in which he had until recently kept his cones. Nothing. It was gone. Lost somewhere in his flight from the swarm. Well wasn't that just *super.* He would almost certainly die here now. His skin would fall off and he would die. Then shiny sis would get her life back. Oh yeah. She'd be back to school in a heartbeat, he had no doubt, probably less. Back to school, qualified, career, partner, kids. The perfect life, without him to spanner it up.

Would she remember him? Like hell she would. She barely remembered him *now* and that was–

*'Shut up, idiot, of course I'd remember you. I love you. Why else would I put up with such a boat–load of unadulterated ass–gravy?'*

Matt narrowed his eyes, glared into the dun–coloured haze. Was that a figure there? Was that–

*'I'd miss you, sure. But you're not going to die.'*

Matt crawled towards the voice. His head was reeling. He wondered how much skin he was leaving on the father dune. What would it feed, those rubbed off parts of him? More lichen? Black flowers like those she'd seen in the healing cave? Or was it

just sterile, poisoned, dead? Just valueless dust to bulk up the nearest dune?

*'If you die here I'll kick your bony teenage ass so far into the future you'll think you're time travelling.'*

'–me will you just shut–'

'–up I can't *think–'*

'–with you shouting like–'

*Skin hurts. Face hurts. Die here.*

*Just leave me to–*

But she wouldn't leave him. She wouldn't leave him in peace to die, had to keep on, whining about every colour of shiny shit under the shiny bullshit rainbow. Cats and cones and giving up her *life* for him. School, and *washing up* and– and– every *other* cockwombling thing.

Matt couldn't take any more.

He lashed out at the voice, fell flat on his ass.

*'That's right! Hit me up up with some more of your random toe–cheese. 'Cause you can't even throw a punch. Can't even smack me up when I'm right in front of you. Come on dude, put it out there. Put it out there. You know you want to. Just hit me if you hate me so much. Just–'*

The voice changed. It wasn't hers. Not the shiny's. It was his. His voice, whining in the father dune. She was wearing it. His voice. His face. Screw that. It was *his* face. He'd have it back or–

*'Look at you. The dingbat perfect storm. Get up you tyre-kicking nobweed. Get up and hit me. Come on. You idiot. You pathetic IDIOT. Just HIT ME. My* life, *you're so BORING. Useless and boring and SHITE.'*

That, finally, seemed like a fair assessment to Matt so he stood up, lashed out again, missed again, fell – again.

*'You lose, Losie McLoser. Come and join the pod. We'll be your friends. All losers together. Or you could just–'*

Matt shrieked.

*'Screw you, you useless piece of ass–cactus! Screw you and all your loser mates! You're not her! You're not mum and you're not my parent! So screw you! Screw the family court for brainless pricks and screw you for one too! I hate you! I BLOODY WELL HATE YOU!'*

Was it his voice or hers? No way of telling. Just pain. Sicking up pain and shit.

*'YOU'RE BLOODY WELL PATHETIC AND I WISH YOU WOULD JUST BUGGER OFF OR DIE LIKE OUR USELESS BLOODY PARENTS!'*

But she didn't die. Nor indeed did she bugger off. And, this being the height of both unfairness and unreasonable behaviour, Matt got up again, and punched again, and when he missed (again, and again) he threw another (and another) and when his punches did not connect he ran and jumped, reaching for her, kicking and screaming, as hard as he could–

And every enraged leap took him further from the ground. And nowhere that he looked did he see her. But she was there, he knew it. She was there and he would find her, and smash the smug–ass smile off her fat ugly–

Matt crashed to the ground, exhausted, agonised, gasping for breath, his body shot through with pain, his mind energised by adrenaline, by unbridled fury, by terror of dying out here, alone in the father dune.

But shiny sis was gone. She'd never been real.

Nothing was real. Just his death.

Just his–

*Hang on.*

Slow lightning in his head. *Something* was real.

Matt sat very still, all his pain forgotten, trying to think, trying to–

*Oh.*

Every time he jumped, he could *see further.*

Matt sat on the ground for a few more minutes. He stayed still and quiet. This idea felt big. It felt important. It felt like – *maybe* – it could save his life.

He focused on it, ignoring the pain creeping slowly back into his hands and face.

Finally, he looked around for the highest outcrop of rock, and fixed its shape in his mind. He walked as far from it as he could without losing sight of it, then jumped as hard as he could into the air. He scanned the horizon as he fell. His leap took him straight up, a hundred metres or more. The fall to earth was sickeningly slow, the impact with the ground hard enough make him grunt with pain. And he'd seen nothing. Just more desert. Without waiting, he turned on the spot, jumped again. Still nothing. But he could see far further than he could from ground level. *Much* further. Maybe twice as far.

Matt turned to his left and began to circle the distant pinnacle of rock whose shape he had memorised. He counted paces. Every five hundred he jumped again. And again. And again.

Hours later he saw something on the horizon.

A tall, thin, column.

Was it smoke?

It could be anything. Anyone. But what else did he have?

With the last of his strength, cursing shiny sis (who wasn't even there, see how much *she* cared) with every step, Matt took a bearing on the smoke, and stumbled into the desert. Long shallow leaps that let him rest between take–off and crashing back to the ground.

He *ran.*

Somewhere on the long run, time lost all meaning. When Matt finally began to see sense again, sense took the form of two overly familiar, overly solicitous faces, one small and tanned, one larger and altogether greener. Both wearing the same exact too–concerned–by–half expressions that they always seemed to have done.

Matt remembered three things before the lights went out again.

The first was the Moroccan chick telling him he'd have been fine if he hadn't panicked and run.

The second was him asking – pardon his French – but *what in the name of remedial merde-monkeys* was she banging on about?

The third was the green face looming over him being joined by a green hand, a huge green hand, lathered in half-chewed lichen, and a bathtub–sized handful of violet spit–slime being slapped onto him from head to toe.

The pain went away again, then, and reality with it.

When he woke again, it was to find himself bouncing painfully up and down while lashed to the block of blue glass the big guy was dragging across the father dune. He croaked something meaningless and the painful bouncing stopped. The Moroccan chick untied him and the big guy sat him up, turned him around. He pointed at the horizon. A vast broken cliff rose there. Barely a week's walk away, it stood as far as he could see in either direction.

'Thag *fug,'* Matt uttered the words in a bashed-in-the-face-with-a-half-bat sort of voice.

The shieldstone wall surrounding the City of Unundium

They were *home.*

**From the Account of Andrea Hansen**
**V**
**The River of the Dead**

So there'd been this one time Andy had managed to snag a ride to the top of the GPO tower in London. The tower had been closed to the public for years (despite every effort by the World Organisation for Telecommunication And Networking to acquire and re–open it), however once a year BT held a Christmas Day there for staff and guests, on a first come first served basis. Two years ago Andy's cousin Jo, who worked for BT, had snagged a couple of places. Andy still had the photos of the view from the revolving restaurant on her phone, and they were fair mind–blowing.

At least they had been until fifty minutes ago.

Fifty minutes ago Andy, Burroughs, Carter and the Princess had arrived at the top of the highest cliff Andy had ever seen. That the desert they'd been walking on had been a table–land came as no surprise to Andy; that it looked to be about twice as high as the Himalayas made her sit down and take stock in a way that she had never done before. Some things were almost too big to take in. You had to turn away or lose it – big–time. This view wasn't like that, wasn't quite that big. But it was big enough. Big enough to bring that feeling of falling down an elevator shaft in your worst nightmare to her chest and keep it there. Big enough to make her blink and go numb while trying to analyse sensations she could barely put a name to. Big enough to make her wish for more than just the remaining thirty percent battery life on her smartphone. It wasn't just a whole planet she was looking at. It was a whole planet of about sixteen times the surface area of Earth. The horizon had to be – what? – a thousand kilometres away? More? How could she still be breathing if they were this high up? The most diligent and talented climbers the world had known would have frozen solid in the deathzone if they'd been on Earth. Frozen solid with their eyes

jammed open in amazement at the tableau laid out before them. This world was a hundred times the size, a thousand times the beauty. As big as it was, the mother sun was still bigger, while the black, broken moons hung slow and lazy, high in the sky, surrounded by a flottilla of tiny dots that were the hulls of Red Armada flux clippers, collecting and shipping their precious cargo of iron back to the surface.

How could there *be* so many shades of red?

She snapped a couple of pix, hoping the scenery would come out right later.

Andy switched the phone off and stuffed it hurriedly back in her jeans pocket when footsteps crunched nearby.

'By all accounts the view is *truly* beautiful – if you can see beyond the visible spectrum,' Carter hunkered down on a nearby jutting spur of smooth, blue–black rock. His hiking boots were about a metre from the drop. 'So Djora tells me, anyway. There are colours out there you and I and the gunslinger back there–' Carter jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards Burroughs. '–will never see.'

Andy blew out her cheeks. 'It's mad enough with just the reds.' She scuffed one foot along the edge of the precipice. 'You paint right? Animals and stuff? Or no – that was your dad, right? John Carter. Menagerie in the garden. Sent you away for... health reasons? Yeah, to–' she stopped. *–grow a spine and join the rest of the vertebrates.* 'Anyway – he sent you away.'

Carter stared at the ground.

Andy got the sense he was not best pleased with the memory, even after all this time. Going on eighty years. Sixty of them right here on Maahes. Andy frowned, trying to make sense of the blue memories jumbled up in her head since the glass tree... the apple. 'You paint landscapes, right? Architecture. History. Sketch them too. Made a living selling the pyramids to tourists. You and your dad... you did the same thing.'

Carter hesitated, choosing his words carefully. 'He wouldn't agree. And he'd be right too.' A sigh. 'Thing is... animals and architecture *aren't* the same thing.' He considered the view. 'I never really understood him. Then again, do you have to understand someone to love them?'

Andy closed her eyes, picturing in her mind (but not in the blue) the face of her father and brother who, despite everything, still seemed close enough to reach out and touch. She had to admit Carter made a fair point.

'Anyway. That was a long time ago.' The distant look in Carter's eyes faded. 'What else do you remember? Anything from...' he glanced back over his shoulder.

Andy pulled focus on the here–and–now, followed Carter's glance sideways. Burroughs and the Princess were using their sidearms to hack slabs of rock from the nearest accessible rock shelf. She had no idea why.

'I thought we were going to a river.' It wasn't the best answer but it would have to do for now.

'We are. You'll see.'

The *whirr* of engines came to her then, travelling the rock walls and canyons leading from the cliff. She looked up sharply. Not before Carter leaped to his feet, gun in hand.

'Edgar!' His voice was brisk. He was peering around in all directions, trying to pinpoint the direction the sound was coming from.

Burroughs spared a single quick glance. 'Flyers. At least three.'

Carter scowled. 'Friends of yours?'

'Green engines sound different.'

Djora sliced off another piece of rock. 'Yellow Men.' She stepped back and the irregular block tumbled to the ground. Burroughs picked it up and tossed it aside. The movement was so casual Andy almost didn't take it in. Burroughs had moved the rock as if it weighed only a few pounds, not the half–ton or so it must actually have weighed. A shape was emerging from the cliff–face, Andy saw. It was about a meter thick, tapering at the edges, roughly lenticular, perhaps five or six meters wide. It looked like a giant's skipping stone from some Brobdingnagian beach.

Djora made a half dozen more cuts with her weapon and the slab of rock fell free. She stepped back, scanning the sky as Carter joined Burroughs and, together, they manhandled it towards the edge of the cliff.

Andy stared. The wind was blowing a fine mist of sand off the ledge of the cliff. It hazed the air. What were they going to do with the rock? Actually – scrub that – how could they even *move* the rock? It had to weigh six or eight times what that other chunk did. As much as a double decker bus.

The time for questions suddenly ran out. The noise of engines rose to a sharp hum and blue fire licked along the side of the cliff. The blast threw Andy to one side. She glimpsed a dun–coloured flying machine scoot overhead as she fell, tumbling though sand and thudding into a rock wall, the sleek hull sliding past so low overhead that the Princess had to crouch to avoid being decapitated by its stubby fins. The hull was emblazoned with a Yellow tribal motif. The symbols chased each other around the inside of Andy's head, her blue memories, their meaning suddenly clear.

*Vanadinese.*

The flyers were *Vanadinese.*

'Move it!' Burrough's voice was sharp, gritty with dust. 'They won't just kill us if they catch us.'

'And whose fault is that?' Carter put his shoulder to the rock and gave it a solid shove which had the slab sliding towards the edge of the cliff. 'Djora!'

The Princess was already moving. She threw out a long arm in Andy's direction, snagged the front of her jacket, yanked her off the ground. She leaped for the slab of rock, landing on it with a jarring thump as it began to tip over the edge of the cliff.

Andy scrabbled desperately for a handhold as the endless horizon she'd been admiring just minutes before tilted slowly up to meet her incredulous gaze.

*'What the hell are you doing!?'*

Andy's screech was lost in another series of violent blue explosions.

Close enough to touch, Burroughs, Carter and Djora were returning fire, weapons aimed up into the storm of sand kicked up by the explosions. Andy flinched away from the blue flame.

Red Men... Green Men... now Yellow Men... 'Are you maniacs at war with *everyone?'*

Her indignant demand was lost in the exchange of gunfire and howl of flyer engines.

Andy choked. Her eyes filled with stinging dust. The world slid sideways.

Clinging desperately to the rock, she *fell.*

Andy had once heard someone say that the camel was the ship of the desert. She'd ridden a camel once. Just once. The animal had been grumpy to the point of obnoxiousness, and had emitted large, gooey bubbles of spit that clung where they touched and burst where they clung, drenching her *Totorro* T-shirt in half a bucket of stinky camel spit. Andy hated that camel, would have paid *mucho grando* hard cash to have it shipped to the farthest tourist resort on the planet. But she'd have given her right arm to have a camel now, or anything resembling it. Because for someone used to click–floor and carpet, walking on sand was hands down first prize the worst torture imaginable, bar none.

'Don't you guys have camels?'

'We have *xorat.'*

*'Throat?'* Andy stumbled over the unfamiliar gurgle. *'Thgggrowat?'*

'But they migrate seasonally.'

'To warmer climes.'

*'Warmer...?'*

'Yes. Bad luck you happened to arrive in the middle of winter. The southern hemisphere is beautiful in summer.'

Andy pinched the bridge of her nose and rubbed her brow to wipe away the sweaty grime which had accumulated there since leaving the cave this morning. *Ambulate. Perspirate. Evaporate.* The words had become a self–flagellant mantra muttered under her breath in an endlessly cycling *moebius* loop. How could it *be* any warmer and she not simply *expire?* And it was *winter?*

'Never mind. So we're hiking then? However far it is to this river of the dead of yours?'

'Not ours.' Carter jerked a thumb. 'Hers.'

'The Princess?'

'Everything on this hemisphere is hers.'

'Or rather, the Emperor's.'

'So the *Emperor* claims.'

'Yes, and we know what we think of *that.'*

'Howard, please don't direct that tone at me. He's your friend.'

'A dubious honour.'

'If you didn't want the honour, you shouldn't have let him try to kill you. Not so many times at least. You've only got yourself to blame.'

'Shoot before being shot at, is that it? Spoken like a true bearer–of–arms.'

'Anyway, that's not all we have to worry about, as you very well know.'

'Yellow Men?' Carter peered around the endless distant horizon, squinting against the dull glare of the mother sun. 'Did I miss something?'

'I don't need to see signs, Howard. The Yellow Men are everywhere. They see

everything. They know where I am every time I step outside the caves. Why else would I abstain from a morning stroll?'

'That's what you get for choosing sides.' Carter's voice was unsympathetic. Andy detected an odd tone there. As if what he said wasn't really what he meant. 'And *don't* try to suggest you didn't know you were choosing sides.'

'I made a mistake.'

'Tell that to the dead.'

'Point taken. As always. For all the difference it ever made to *them.'*

'Edgar it's been *sixty years.* Did you ever even *try* to apologise?'

'I tried.'

'You tried and failed?'

'I tried and a dozen of my friends died.'

Burroughs drew and checked his sidearm, then re–holstered it, being careful, Andy noticed, to leave the flap unbuttoned. 'You never *see* them,' he whispered. 'And if you do see them it's already too late.'

'Edgar, the Yellow Men are not Apache.'

'No they're not,' Burroughs agreed. 'Apache you can reason with – if you catch them on a good day. The Yellow Men... they're worse than Apache. Worse even than Comanche.'

'Well maybe,' Andy tried unsuccessfully to control a sudden surge of anger. *'Someone* we know shouldn't have hunted their buffalo herds to extinction and forced them into starvation.'

Burroughs turned suddenly to glare at her.

'It's the past – so what?' Andy stood her ground. 'Anyone with a tablet and a taste for history knows it. You,' she returned Burroughs' glare with as much intensity as she could muster. 'Messed up, buster. And I don't mean *en passant*.'

Burroughs' stare intensified. His hand fell again to the sidearm holstered at his hip.

'What're you gonna do, shoot me?' Andy scowled to hide the fear she felt. 'Then you wouldn't be able to poison me or drug me or whatever other sick thing it is you have in mind to do.'

The Princess moved closer to Burroughs, covering the space between them in a single step. She reached down to rest her hand lightly on his shoulder. Her fingers reached most of the way to his wrist.

Burroughs didn't move.

'I have no plans to kill you,' he said softly, at length. 'But I will require an apology for your insult to my fellow cavalrymen.'

Andy wondered how much further out of control things could get.

'Then you're going to be *requiring* a very long time.'

Carter moved between them. With his back to Andy, he muttered something she didn't hear. She heard Burroughs' reply, though.

'No Howard, she's not *just a girl.* Not here. Not on Maahes. Here she's a White Man. With all that implies. She just doesn't know it yet.'

'And never will if you have your way.'

Burroughs scowled, shrugged off the Princess' hand and turned away. Carter followed. The two men continued arguing in voices too soft for Andy to hear.

The immediate threat seemingly having passed, Andy tried unsuccessfully to hide her impatience as Burroughs and Carter continued hosing down the decks. She glared up at the Princess and cleared her throat pointedly. 'And the River? Of the Dead? Of which we were *speaking?*'

Burroughs shouted back over his shoulder. 'It's not far. Three days to the Black Falls. Three days with *her,'* he jerked a thumb at Andy, who felt her temper rise again.

**'Our journey would last half as long if you stopped behaving like *Green Men*.'**

Carter and Burroughs turned as one to stare at the Princess. Their expressions were like something from a Boy's Own Adventure annual, or Saturday Morning Pictures. Andy looked inwards for strength, silently asking Robbie *how the heck she'd gotten mixed up with these dumb apes anyhow.* No answer being forthcoming from the spirit of *Me And My Monkey*, Andy put her head down and forged ahead, leaving Burroughs and Carter and the Princess, to follow.

'Hell with it,' she said, a hundred burning steps later. 'I apologise for implying you and all your friends were murdering racists. It all happened a long time ago, anyhow, so let's pretend it never came up. But somebody say something, unless you *want* to see this *White Man* go full–fat Tinkerbell? And you wouldn't like *that,* I can assure you. So take my mind off the fact that you're clearly planning to walk me to death if not a worse fate. Tell me about this war of yours.'

Burroughs and Carter exchanged looks. *Good enough,* Burrough's expression seemed to say. 'You will learn of the war from the fruit of the tree,' he added aloud.

'The... what, now?'

'The tree will show you many things.'

**'If it does not kill you.'**

*And if it does kill me? Who'll watch out for the idiot bro then? Who'll stop* him *getting killed?*

**'There are other lives than these under the mother sun.'** The Princess' voice was quiet, barely above the level of a soccer crowd applauding a match–winning goal. **'This is known, even to the *nameless* and the *jeju* of the Green Men.'**

'You can tell *that* theory to Barking Bernard Brennan at Eastville Social Services.'

**'White Men bark?'** The Princess glanced sideways at Burroughs. **'Like *woolaggh?* This has not been revealed to me.'** The rumbling undertone in her voice, directed primarily at Burroughs, indicated that this lack of useful intelligence should immediately be rectified.

The officer and gentleman in question sighed. 'It was a figure of speech, Djora. Just– please, give it no further thought, I implore you.' He sighed minutely. 'A hundred and ten *years,'* he muttered, *sotto voce.*

Somewhere off to one side Carter chuckled. 'And it barely feels like half a century.'

Half melting under the mother sun, Andy only wished she found things half as *entertaining.*

Andy clung to cracks in the rock and waited for the crushing blow which would end her life when the slab hit the ground, at the base of the falls, kilometres below. After a few seconds she stopped waiting for that and started waiting for the annoying sick feeling in her stomach caused by being in freefall to stop. When it didn't she threw up and after that felt better – slightly.

All this was, of course, considered on balance after the fact. *During* the fact she was too busy bricking it and screaming abuse at the rampant idiots who'd put her in harm's way to notice much of anything else.

Nonetheless she continued to fall, while the Yellow flyers continued to pursue and attack. Somewhere voices (entirely *not* panicky voices, and how did they manage that, again? Was falling off a giant cliff on a big rock actually *commonplace* for these people?) espoused the various inefficiencies of non–steerable rock and pursuers who were, it transpired, entirely too dogged and relentless to be convenient.

'I told Tanta Sten the Yellow Men were going to be a problem if he wasn't more careful.'

**'Tanta Sten is Emperor. Name a ruler who has ever listened to reason.'**

'Since you ask there were several throughout the Egyptian dynasties. Amenhotep II wouldn't be a bad place to start. His reign saw the effective cessation of hostilities between Egypt and Mitanni, the major kingdoms vying for power in Syria. There's a reason, you know, that his name means *Amun is Satisfied.* He even had a daughter who was briefly Pharaoh after his death, did you know th–'

'Howard, do you *want* to lose the Princess to a king's ransome? Risk everything we've done to broker peace on this world? No? Then please *stop talking and continue shooting!'*

The barely contained absurdity of Andy's situation provoked a sudden chuckle. The impulse didn't last long and was, she later decided, due as much to hysteria as the fact that it had been she herself who had amended the Wikipedia article on Amenhotep II which quoted so extensively from the notes Carter would presumably make in later life. Assuming any of them returned alive to Earth. Amenhotep II's daughter – *the girl who would be king* – was her best friend: Erimem. A woman this world considered for some unfathomable reason to be the most ruthlessly violently and uncompromisingly destructive person in their entire history. Which, given both the length of their history and the ridiculous level of commonplace violence she had observed since arriving here was, quite frankly, nothing short of stupefying.

So, confused and terrified, and giggling hysterically, Andy fell. And continued to fall. Long past the probability of imminent collision with the ground. Surrounded by clouds of choking sand and blasts of blue flame, gasping for breath and clawed by shrapnel.

Large boulders, blasted clear of the rock face, banged against the slab she was clinging to. One impacted near enough for shrapnel to sting her arm and face, left her clinging to the rock by one hand, body and legs waving in the air. Azure light bloomed above, pushing her abruptly back against the slab. She grasped another hand–hold in the rock, pulling herself back against the rough surface, finding more

holds for her feet and knees, and digging in as hard as she could, feeling a wedge of rock crack and fall away, finding another hold and trying to tuck herself even more tightly against the surface.

For all the good it would do when they hit the ground.

Andy briefly considered screaming further insults at her companions who, incredibly, showed no signs of choking to death in the sand–loaded air. Instead she pressed her face into the rough, porous surface, trying to find some clean air to breathe, and offered a silent prayer to a pantheon of gods she did not believe in that her life would not end, not here, not today, not before she'd had a chance to meaningfully accomplish any of the things on her *to–do–this–life* app.

Andy was aware she had jammed her eyes tightly shut when a knocking sound on the rock immediately in front of her face caused her to open them and look up. A blue glass pistol was tapping against the rock surface. She refocused, squinting through the streaming clouds of sand. The pistol was clamped in a red fist. A *huge* red fist.

Andy realised the gun was being offered to her; the Princess was not even looking at her either. She was staring up, looking for targets, firing her other weapon with her other hand.

A memory of the pitched battle on the Red Corvette when the Green pirates attacked filled her mind. The nearness of red skin, sparkling with sweat and jewels, the heady scent of royal flesh and imminent death. It was not the first time the Princess' weapons had found their way into Andy's grasp.

'Are we making a pattern, here, Princess?'

'Either way, it would be considerably helpful,' Carter's voice came from nearby but out of her sight. 'If you'd stop chatting and take up arms against the itinerant buggers currently trying to curtail our lives!'

Andy stared at the blue glass monoliths erupting from the desert at every angle imaginable, as if frozen in the moment of a vast eruption. There was a sense of barely restrained energy here. She felt dizzy just looking at the place. But Burroughs led the way into the maze of glass without hesitation while Carter flanked the group and the Princess brought up the rear, all with weapons drawn.

Just in case.

The journey here from Burroughs' underground home had taken many days. Andy had lost count of the times she had thought about trying to run away. In the end she hadn't tried. There was a reason her companions had not compelled or restrained her, and she had the sense to recognise it. The desert was too dangerous. Burroughs, Carter and the Princess knew their way around it; had lived here, perhaps for decades. But Andy had more than half a feeling that if she made a run for it, she'd maybe last a day. *Maybe.* Getting herself killed in the *here–and–now* was no way to save Matt in the *then–and–there*. No. For now her only option was to go along with whatever it was her companions had in mind for her, while struggling to redefine them in her mind from *nearly friends* to *not quite captors.*

Passing beneath the first of the vast monoliths Andy wondered how big the huge crystals actually were, how much of them might be concealed beneath the surface,

what else might also be concealed there as well. She also found herself wondering if they were even crystals at all, really? Or was her mind applying a convenient label to something so utterly beyond her experience there was no word for it in her terrestrial lexicon? They *looked* like crystals; huge chunks, many broken, measuring maybe fifty metres long. Sunlight poured through them, forming shimmering pools among the harsh yellow dunes. Something about the enormous chunks reminded her of nothing so much as the huge contruction slabs used on housing projects, slabs that just so happened to be made of pale blue glass instead of pre–poured concrete. Was this the remains of a city? One that had been swallowed by the desert, just as those of Erimem's time had been swallowed by the deserts of Earth? Friendship with the Egyptian woman had given Andy a unique perspective on history. She studied the vast heat-hazed shapes, fascinated despite her situation. She had more than half a feeling she was right. There had been a city here once. There *must* have been. She tried to get a sense of how big it might have been, failed utterly. There was no way of guessing how many blocks there had once been, how many might still lie beneath the dunes. Just the blocks she could see would easily have been enough to construct a moderate sized town.

Distracted by her thoughts, Andy nearly bumped into Burroughs when he stopped. He signalled to Carter and the Princess, who approached, still keeping their weapons drawn. Andy wondered what they might be keeping watch for. It occurred to her for the first time that it might be *her.*

Maybe she *should* have made a run for it.

Burroughs had stopped near the center of the area of monoliths. The sand was piled in high dunes here, shielded from the wind by the maze of blue glass beyond. That same wind wound restlessly through the encircling slabs, picking up grains of sand, endlessly rubbing the glass, making each ring with an ethereal resonance; an exotic scale, calling to mind the rare performance of a Benjamin Franklin glass armonica the Museum of Antiquities had displayed on loan from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for three months the previous summer; a glass armonica playing a strange open chord; not eerie, not even unsettling... *otherworldly.*

Or no: maybe the sound was more like the aolian wind harp in Ibrahim Hadmani's garden.

*Ibrahim.*

*Matt.*

A tear touched the corner of her eye. Andy wiped it roughly away.

Without speaking, Burroughs crouched and beckoned her to follow him into the narrow triangular space under a single vast overhanging slab. Andy most assuredly did not want to go into that space. But running would almost certainly invite coercion, perhaps violence, maybe even get her killed. She glanced over her shoulder at Carter and the Princess. Carter was looking away, scanning their surroundings. The Princess – the same woman who'd healed her in the cave of black flowers – now returned her gaze with a blank coldness Andy was repelled by. Without wasting another moment, she turned, crouched, and followed Burroughs under the slab of blue glass, through a passage banked with sliding sand, and into a wide hollow. Here Burroughs finally

stepped aside.

Andy stood upright, looking around.

There was something in the hollow at the foot of the sand bank. It looked like a fairy ring made of blue glass. There was something at its center. A mirror–flat, irregularly shaped plane, like a frozen pool, a hole in the world as pale and delicate a gemlike blue as the desert surrounding it was a coarse and granular furnace red. Andy was mesmerised. Something was growing from the flat plane. Something that looked like a tree; small, irregular, beautifully formed. A bonsai made from blue glass. She wondered if it was a sculpture; if it was how it had survived the destruction here.

The tree hummed, which was odd because there was no wind in the hollow beneath the huge slabs. The space around her was absolutely still. Was the tree resonating with the distant sound of wind in crystal? A harmonic resonance? Or even dissonance?

Scattered around the fairy ring were a number of small objects. Blue glass spheres. Well, ovoids, really. Andy picked one up. It was about the size of an apple – it *was* an apple, she suddenly realised. A *glass* apple. Or a seed anyway. A seed from the strange glass tree growing in front of her.

The apple reacted when she picked it up. It *sang.* The sound got into Andy's head, and she resonated with it. Startled, she dropped the strange fruit – but it did not fall. It simply hung in the air at the exact spot her fingers had released it, motionless.

No. Not motionless. It was moving, with everything around it; the tree, the dunes, the glass maze... the planet itself, moving through the universe at tens – hundreds – of thousands of kilometres per hour.

Random lyrics from Monty Python's *Galaxy Song* whirled suddenly through Andy's mind. She felt strange. She was having a problem, she realised, with reality. Apples weren't glass, no indeed. And they didn't float in the air like party balloons either. But here was one doing just that, in brazen defiance of all that physics held right and sensible. In front of a tree made from blue glass. A glass tree through which – Andy peered closely – she now realised living sap pulsed from roots to trunk to branch to buds – to minutely unfolding flowers.

But where was the sunshine this glass miracle needed to live, she wondered.

Was *she* it's sunshine?

Its *power?*

There certainly was power here, she could feel it, coming out of the ring, the pool, the tree, in smooth waves, dancing at the very edge of her senses, sight to touch to smell. The area surrounding the tree shimmered, as if *(felt tasted)* seen through a heat haze. Somewhere inside Andy felt herself shimmering too, resonating as harmoniously as any sympathetic string. A complex, achingly beautiful, microtonal chord. Something was changing inside her head. Her... perception? No... her... sense of... she blew out her cheeks – warm breath riding cool shimmer – sense of... no. It was gone. Everything was gone. Fear. Anger. The sunburned skin on the tip of her nose... the whole of the outside of her body... everything felt far away. Far away and getting farther. She was gone too, very nearly, almost completely, merging from the inside out with the shimmering force spilling out of the ring, the blue glass... there

and... not... there and...

*I'm losing me,* she thought, and in the moment of thinking was aware of thought and thinker as separate things; wave and particle, uncommon duality. Separate but connected somehow, thought and thinker, seed and tree, riding together apart on the shimmering resonance, the blue glass, the ring, the fairy ring, the blue... blue... ring...

Once upon a time Andy had received a phone call from Erimem from South America. Her friend had been in a pool, coming down from an Ayahuasca trip, looking for the inside of the sky, whatever. Andy had missed the end of the call, distracted by dumbell Matt doing something dumb. Typical. Some secret there she could almost touch, on the other side of the world, the other side of the wifi, some secret E was close to... but Andy had missed it. Just like Andy had missed a lot of other things. Education. Parents. A life. But it was OK. It was there. Had been there. For E, anyway. And that meant it was real. Andy thought about this. Yes. Real, for real. Whatever that moment, truth, vision was, it existed. For E. She knew it. Because she felt it now. Felt the same thing she had that day, on the wrong end of the wifi. But closer. So much *closer.* She recognised it, even though she'd never seen it. Recognised it and reached out to it. Touched it. Breathed it in. Bathed in it.

A pool. A black pool, and black flowers, velvet smooth.

Black flowers, voices like breath.

Black in the blue, in the red.

In the blue

fire, blooming, drove Andy back into the meagre shelter of rock.

She'd completely lost track of time: how long they'd been falling; she seemed to exist in a permanent *now* composed of shrapnel and blue fire and shouted instructions, while a world composed of stunning panoramic desert vistas glimpsed intermittently through abrasive streams of sand and razor sharp pinnacles of rock whirled dizzyingly around her.

*'–This way! Lean! Shift the centre of mass–'*

*'–towards the middle current! Faster is better!–'*

*'–you both off your wacky meds? Faster is just* faster!*–'*

Over. Under. Left. Right.

Gravity was a useless concept when you were falling free.

*'–aim high, the sand refracts your–'*

*'–shooting too–'*

*'–shut up and let me–'*

*'–no, no! There! THERE!–'*

For Andy the ride on the falling rock was tantamount to insanity. Simply falling would have been quite bad enough. But Andy quickly realised this was no simple fall. The slab bucked and twisted and bucked again, propelled by the alien currents; white river, black rock; chutes and tunnels, barely glimpsed through the stinging fog of sand.

And now she was normalising to the process, blue memories were surfacing. Memories of rock rafting, years old; not hers; Burroughs', Carter's. Because the rock

wasn't *falling.* Unpowered free–falling objects did not accelerate and decelerate, not on any planet governed by the physical laws she subscribed to. The rock was clearly under the influence of a power source. But what was it? She searched her new memories for answers which remained maddeningly elusive. What were the *Black Falls?* What were *blue rays?* What was *the ninth field?* The clearest image she could catch was friction generated magnetism. But even that didn't make sense. Friction could generate electric potential and that in turn could generate magnetic fields, but... the slab weighed *tons.* Simple inertia alone would have the thing dropping like a – well, like a thumping great lump of rock.

Andy sucked air that tasted of cinnamon and sand, tracked a Yellow flyer as it dropped towards them, raised her weapon, fired. Blue fire splashed around the craft, scorching its painted hull. In truth, Andy wasn't trying too hard to aim straight. Killing was not second nature to her. She hoped it never would be. Erimem had once told her she would die because of that philosophy, which she had described as 'broken'. But Andy simply could not believe Erimem was been right. Not then, on Earth, in the 21st century; not here, on Maahes, right now.

Not despite every memory she had to the contrary.

White memories and blue, as confusing as the fall itself.

Then again why *would* the blue memories make any sense? They were the memories and understanding of two guys who lived a hundred years before the internet, before wifi and smartphones and her second–best–friend doctor wiki; an alien giantess who had experienced even less than they of the time and place Andy called home; an enire world rammed to the gills with same. No. Whatever effect was actually directing the raft's motion here was filtered through the understanding of two of the three oldest people she'd ever met and one of the most alien. The only person she knew with a less clear understanding of the events now taking place would be Erimem herself. Of *course* the memories would not make *sense.*

What they *might* show her, she supposed, still helplessly over-thinking, was a way to survive – if she was smart enough to recognise it. Or if the instinct for survival Erimem assured her was common to everyone kicked in before it was too late.

*Instinct.* Andy didn't like the word. It was too much like *feelings.*

Trusting her feelings had never been a comfortable position for Andy. Logic and science were her tools of choice; balance and transparency. Lord knew she'd been on the wrong end of assumptions more times than she could count. Assumptions because she was young not old, because she was service staff not a student, because she was female not male. To all this uncertainty and prejudice had recently been bolted the violent loss of parents, the assumed guardianship of her kid–iot brother, and the mountain of collateral tosh which went along with both. Andy's view of herself, on the other hand, was a far less straightforward one, barely glimpsed let alone fully grasped: the classic double–path, she had once thought following a reckless dalliance with Young's *Wave–Particle Duality* experiment; the net result of which was that on any given day, despite the best laid plans, she literally had no idea where she would end up, how she'd arrive, or whether she'd travel there in *state A* or s*tate B*. Andy quite definitely had views about herself she hadn't fully explored yet. But it had been

looking like all that was on hold even before life had pitched her head first into *state C* – or in other words, an Egyptian tomb, an alien planet and, most recently, off the edge of this preposterously high cliff.

Andy glared up at the cliff in question, tracked the Yellow fliers through the abrasive murk, aimed and fired, aimed and fired. If she did that enough maybe the other guys would back off enough to let things calm down. All the while, somewhere in her head, there swam other memories than her own. Blue memories. Red hostility. Green betrayal. Yellow loathing. The knowledge that on this world, *everyone* hated the White Man, and wanted to kill them.

Because of fear? Madness? Self–celebrating idiocy?

Or just because of Erimem?

Before the thought could really go anywhere two of the Yellow flyers swooped down, at first paralleling their direction of fall, then approaching. Other flyers hovered somewhere out of sight in the torrents of sand, Andy could hear the whine of engines but could not detect the direction.

*'Andrea!'*

*'I see them. Shouting at me won't help!'*

Andy took aim. The flyer nearest her was circling, moving in for a close quarters attack. A long narrow hatch in the hull slid open and lines uncoiled. Andy knew what would happen next, was under no illusions as to what would follow should they be captured. She took aim at the lines, hoping to burn them before the Yellow Men could descend. Her tactic was too successful. The ropes burned – and so did one wing of the flyer. The sleek craft tumbled sideways, scattering Yellow Men into the falls, crashed into a vast slab of rock and exploded. The concussion split the slab from the cliffside and it fell, cracking apart as it tumbled towards them. At the last second it fell to either side of the raft, fell in a smooth tumble of jointed *(arch it was an ARCH! a huge window)* stone and Andy, gaping with astonishment, realised that the cliffs weren't cliffs at all, they were the remains of a vast ancient city, long abandoned, eroded over time by the wind off the plateau and falling sand. The edge of the plateau was a series of gargantuan skyscrapers, vastly larger than any earthly structures, dividing the Black Falls into a lethal, tumbling maze of river–sand.

The plateau *was* the city.

It had been under her feet for the entire journey.

With the sudden understanding came more blue memories. Even as the vicious currents carried the raft *through* part of one building Andy's head was filled with images from the past. The vast city, its malls and homes and parks and sacred spaces. A world in minature, testament to architecture as high art. Andy saw no people – or perhaps she saw people and simply did not recognise them as such – but that didn't matter. The city was palpably alive: it breathed and sang; had purpose, an undeniable vision.

A vision lost to time, mother sun and father dune.

The raft fell, fleeing Yellow flyers and chunks of disintegrating city–corpse. Andy reeled, stunned by the concussive vision, barely able to keep a grip on her weapon and the rock. And then she did lose her grip, and the sand flooding her mouth and

nose and eyes began to carry her away.

Three hands, two small and tanned, one huge and red, gripped her at the same time, pulling her back to the safety of rock.

Too late.

Azure fire bloomed. Rock cracked.

The raft split.

Andy, lost to blue visions, was lost also to the Black Falls.

*Andy was six when mum disappeared for two days. When dad brought her home she was carrying a baby. Even at six, Andy realised her brother was an odd kid. For a start he was a girl. Secondly he was bright red. And thirdly he was about six inches taller than mum. If she'd stood him upright, of course. Which even dad couldn't do because he weighed in barely shy of a Shetland pony.*

*Andy had been aware things were getting weird around the house for some time. The nameless had been acting strange ever since water supplies began to run short. The shutdown of Ferrohelios' primary hydroforge and sudden loss of fully half its supply of water not only fuelled tension in the nameless but starved the outlying arms of the city, those highest above the desert, of critical nourishment. Well, she knew what that was about, all right. The Green tribes were on the rise, their target: the hydroforges, the storm mines, even the refinery. War, a long time coming, had finally arrived.*

*Ferrohelios, the last living city on Maahes, began slowly to die.*

*Resources had been scarce enough that diverting them to the birth ceremony had been a cause of both political friction for the Emperor and personal embarassment for Andy's father, the Emperor.*

*No wait, hang on, that wasn't right. Not father.* Mother. *Yes. That was–*

*No. That wasn't right either. It wasn't* blue *enough.*

*Andy frowned – no – oh! That was it!*

That *was what was wrong.*

*She wasn't Andy she was*

*unremembered things came to her then, blue flood in the black falls; poison seeds of the glass apple, planted in her head, growing unchecked through the soil of her*

*mind blazing with blue fire, visions of apocalypse, the flash of light from khopesh clashing together as a moon died and a new sea was born below fleets of ships like stars in the night, and the sky burned with blue fire as the sickly child, banished from London, banished from Norfolk, painted his visions of a civilisation long dead and a soldier from Arizona, who chased Apache but caught only dystentry, bore witness to a girl with a glass face at war with herself, child of her own death, Queen of Two Worlds, and both of her dead, slain by the venom of time and memory, the poisonous seeds of the glass apple from the tree of*

*but were they poison, really, these seeds, this knowledge? Apple seeds contained*

*cyanide, true, but in such minute quantities you'd have to swallow several bowls crammed with them – about ten or twenty thousand, say – to actually kill yourself. How many apples made ten thousand seeds? Well, let's say half a dozen seeds per apple. Make it ten for easy math. A thousand apples. And how many trees was that? Let's say fifty apples per tree. No, make it a hundred to be on the safe side. That's a hundred trees. An orchard. And wasn't that something the shiny sis would have fun planting? And trundling around in, feeling superior, while the rest of us plebs had to make do with this asphalt hell, this concrete jungle, this giant's causeway of blocks, an endless horizon of city, caught between father dune and mother sun, trapped there, pressed flat and dried out like bugs and flowers and dinosaurs between the pages of history; bugs and flowers and dinosaurs, and even stranger*

*fruit lay all around her, everywhere drowning, a sea of juice, of liquid glass, but only the one hung before her, glass fruit of an invisible tree, humming with energy, with blue fire memories, with*

*one bite (just one because the glass apple looked so sweet, so juicy sweeeeeeeeeeet and)*

*andy (ah, but was it really she who) cried out, mouth stuffed with bitter sand, the black falls, outside getting inside, filling her up, pushing her aside, folding and unfolding her, human origami, rearranged, a violent beauty gone to time and*

*pain filled her then and*

*darkness and*

*the glass seeds in her grew wild in every path and glade.*

Time begat history, and history begat questions, always.

One of the burning questions of Andy's late teenage years had been the Fermi Paradox. If the universe was so big, Fermi asked, where were the aliens? Were they living so far away, in galaxies receding so fast, that the light from their civilisations would never reach us? Or were they everywhere and we simply couldn't see them, although they could easily see us? Maybe they'd lived and died long before our own civilisation arose, or would do so long after it had vanished from existence?

Or maybe they'd simply blown themselves to bits, just as it now seemed all too plausible we ourselves one day might?

There were any number of answers to Fermi's question; in balmier days Andy had considered as many of them as she found sufficiently intriguing. But quantifying a theory without evidence was a zero sum game; in the end, the infinitely variable answers to Fermi's question could all be housed within one of two possibility sets: either we were alone or we weren't. Clarke wasn't the only fabulist who'd proposed that either possibility was equally terrifying. But fear wasn't the reason she'd had

packed in the job lot as a dead loss. For Andy all answers were equally meaningless when faced with the simple truth: time and space being what they were, the odds were better than even she'd never know which answer was real. And if there was one thing Andy had recently become very sure of, amply demonstrated by the death of her parents, it was knowing the difference between what was real and was not real.

Post *life intervention,* of course, everything was different. She had friends – many friends – who argued without pause that the question itself – *any* question – was what was important, regardless of the answer. One of her facebook friends, currently studying the unlikely combination of philosophy and quantum physics in UCLA, argued conversely that the question Fermi posed was completely null: how could we be alone or not–alone when we couldn't even define the current state of *we?* Andy more than slightly suspected her friend was deriving his perspective from a combination of gender politics, bad logic and cheap weed; however FB being FB, like Fermi itself, she had no real way of knowing for sure, and so had decided to administer the benefit of the doubt while getting on with the inarguably entangled jobs that were (in no particular order) serving food to students less bothered about life than herself and being legal guardian to half-bat-Matt, the brother from another planet, which issues currently bookended her days with walls only slightly less insurmountable than that separating balmy Westeros from the cold and scary North.

And all this had been the case until a second, relatively recent, somewhat more stupefying life intervention had amply demonstrated to her that there was rather more to heaven and earth, Horatio, than had previously been dreamed of by her parents, FB friends, benefits advisors and, in all likelihood, the majority of philosophers and physicists who'd ever taken a stroll through the heady pageant known as *life.*

As a consequence of which here she was, smack dab in the middle of indecision city; citizen one in the place where confusion and possibility were apparently as unto stars in the night sky: ubiquitous, inescapable and provoking of so many conflicting emotions that her overwhelming need right now was to run screaming to the nearest dark corner and hide there until the world made more sense.

Screaming and hiding in dark corners were two other things Andy had never been great at. Confrontation hadn't always been her thing either, true, but it had been a thing she had grown to embrace. She now considered it, with fair evidence to support the theory, a life skill acquirable by dint of diligent research and constant practice. (An opportunity afforded daily by Matt-the-dingbat.)

Which is why she was appalled and terrified to find herself, as the blue memories faded and the gardener in her head began to exert some small authority over the jungle planted there by the blue seeds of the glass apple, standing in semidarkness over the body of a Yellow Man.

When standing, the Yellow Man would have been tall and thin, though not as tall and thin as the Red Men. His features were also thin, with clean, redacted lines; an icon of a face now distorted in death. His head was much flatter and wider than she thought it should be, though, and for a moment Andy was confused. Her blue memories were telling her his head should not be the shape that she could very plainly see it was.

Andy's confusion was partially resolved when she realised the reason for the Yellow Man's head being misshapen was that it had been smashed in by a lump of blue glass.

A lump she was currently holding in one mustard–coloured–blood soaked fist.

At which point, a number of questions perhaps more acutely pertinent than the cosmological paradox posed by Enrico Fermi entered her head; top ranking among them, *WTAF!?*

Follow up enquiries included (but were not limited to): where was she; what had happened to her; why did the Yellow Men want to kill her (that was obvious; everyone wanted to kill the White Men); and where had she found the strength to smash in his head with something as arguably ineffective as a lump of glass of a size she could more-or-less hold in her fist?

Andy found herself – very briefly – considering the idea that the reason there might be no aliens in the universe was perhaps because they'd all taken one look at humanity – and immediately hoofed-it for the safety of pastures new. Then she stopped thinking in favour of throwing up, regaining her senses only with considerable effort, when she realised that the sound of running footsteps echoing throughout the vasty deeps strongly suggested that the Yellow Men – who, if her response had been anything to judge by, clearly had every intention of killing her – had managed to track her down.

Andy straightened up and looked around.

Chambered gloom, everywhere.

Black arches, piled high, duned in shadows.

She knew what the city had been like once, because she remembered it so. Or no... was *remembered* really the right word? Could a directly experienced memory be more than a million years old? Was it even from the *past* at all? Had she experienced what the city *would be* like? A million years from now?

The points were moot. What was not moot was that she was in danger, imminent and mortal. Peculiar gender issues notwithstanding she was a White Man being hunted by Yellow Men who wanted to do far worse than take her life.

Fist clamped around the lump of blue glass, Andy *ran.*

*Time and memory, an arcane jungle, bloomed in her head.*
*Vines and branches, fruited history, growing, dying, rotting, seeding.*
*Reality spores; seeds of memory; beryl pollen on a black wind, drifting.*

The cave... no... not a cave... loomed... no... not a cave... a room. A huge room. Loomed. A loom room. Filled with the past. Writing. No. Not a room. A tomb. A stone tomb. A stone tomb room loom – *boom!* A tomb made of history and intention and religion and... oh yeah, and *stars.* No, wait. Not stars. Spiky stars. Noooooooo– Not spiky. Writing... spiky... spiky *writing.* Symbols... language... the voice of the dead. Vocabulary that she knew, that she spoke, but only in her memory. Her blue memory. Her blue memory where she wasn't who she was when she wasn't in her blue–

*Jinkies*, she thought, interrupting herself rudely. I'm so *stoned.*

Why am I so– wait... maybe the guy, her FB friend – what was his name? – maybe (s)he was right. How could we know who we were if we weren't who we thought we were when we...

The thought trickled away to nothing, dried up to dust, drifted away among the shadows, the time–carved glyphs.

She chuckled.

*I'm so*, she thought, *chuffing well*– Nope. Hang on there Bald Eagle. Done that; thought there. Fffffff. I feel like a Texan Bar. How deliciously retro.

Like the cave– the... *tomb.* The tomb filled with– wait... she just *had* it... hi... hi–rise... heironymous hyram hackenbacker bosch... bosssssch... *drill*... drill *down*... higher down... deeper out... frack it all and wash out the rubble with contaminated... with... hydro... hyro...

… *heiroglyphs.*

The tomb was filled with *heiroglyphs.*

And the face. It was filled with a *face,* too.

Elegant. Imperial. Beautiful.

A face she *knew.*

*'... holy macaroni, E...'* Her voice fluttered and crept in the vasty deep of the dead city; the city that was not dead to her; that was dead and alive at the same time to her; past and future; particle and wave, electron spin up, electron spin down; the *duat,* heaven and earth, forever entangled. Swirling past the face which filled a wall from floor to vaulted ceiling, a face dressed in shadows taller than a dozen Red Men. A face three and a half thousand years her elder. Her best friend.

*'... what the hell did you DO to them?'*

She knew of course.

The fruit of the tree of time, the blue fruit, the seed of the glass apple, planted the answer in her head, nurtured it from a shoot to a sapling, to a mature plant with fruit of its own and a deep need for the sun; remembered of her, and for her; interchanged her with the things she wasn't. Philosphised her. Cosmologised her. *Entangled* her, past with future. Wave and particle. Memory and experience. Spin up, spin down. Another day in the *duat.*

Ah. What a chuckle. What a right old chuckle it all was.

Past, present, future.

Any number of strange ol' sideways...

Black flowers. Blue glass pollen.

Phew.

Trippy, man.

And tired. Was she ever *(tired forever)* tired.

So... there was her face.
The Lost Pharaoh. Erimem.
Large as an office block: feature wall in the biggest tomb on the planet.
But... why was it there? How had it got there? What the hell did it mean?

The answers were clear. Clear as blue glass. The glass in her head.
The glass in the eyes in the huge face of her friend.
The one remaining eye.

*Time* had put it there. As a *promise.*
A promise to the future.
A promise to *kill.*

When Andy splashed down in the pools at the bottom of the Black Falls she was barely conscious, her heart pounding her chest and shaking her ribs with the force of a 1099cc liquid cooled twin cylinder *Ducati* road bike being ridden hell for leather to the finish line. She barely felt the impact. Her eyes were jammed shut. One bloody hand was jammed over her face to stop her smashing it open on the rocks, and to block the sand getting in while she struggled to breathe. The hand over the face thing was a holdover from swimming lessons, her bronze survival test. Jump in the pool wearing pyjamas, take them off, tie knots in the legs, make a float, pretend you're on the Titanic. A memory from more than a decade ago, washing ashore on the beach of her mind, the kid who'd made to take off his PJs and realised he'd forgotten his trunks; a white memory fresh as a daisy compared to the blue memories swimming through her head, drowning her from the inside out, sucking her down into the lethal undertow of history.

Andy kicked for the shore, for the surface, anywhere she could *breathe.* No good. Why would it be? Sand was not water. Sand was *sand.* She was sinking in it, already long buried, and air was running out. Her head was pounding, coloured blobs dancing before her jammed shut eyes, bad night at a worse club.

But there were currents in the Black Falls, currents she somehow knew. Subsurface tides that drove her here and there, one more chunk of trash in the ocean.

She flashed on a youtube video: an island of plastic waste slopping around in the middle of the China Sea. Coffee cups, milk bottles, cereal givaways, broken combs, half–used chapsticks, plastic bags, all the non–recyclables, a full set. And here she was, just the same. Human trash cast loose in an alien sea, drowning. How long did she have left? Seconds probably, no way she could hold her breath longer than–

Something hard and unyielding smacked into the side of her hand, squashing it painfully against her cheeks and nose. She uttered an inarticulate noise of pain, was gripped by the sudden overwhelming desire to sneeze. She struggled to keep her mouth shut. If she sneezed she was dead.

More objects bashed into her.

Rocks. They were–

moving they were–

tumbling. Swirling. *Rising.*

With no more conscious thought than any other drowning swimmer, Andy reached for the nearest boulder, found a ledge, grabbed on, felt herself yanked in directions that were not down.

Half a second before the impulse to sneeze would have ended her life, Andy's head broke the surface. She did sneeze then and the pain of sand rasping back up and out of her lungs and throat was horrendous.

But she could *breathe*.

Sucking great gulps of spiced air, Andy opened her eyes. She was in rapids, a river of sand tumbling away from the falls, a river through which dozens – hundreds – of rocks bounced and drifted, crashing together as they washed along like torn up trees in any Earthly river swollen from flooding.

Andy breathed, clutched onto the floating rock, let it carry her downstream, twisting and turning in random arcs and spirals as it went, yanking herself here and there as the rock thudded against others nearby, desperate to avoid being crushed.

She resisted the impulse to close her eyes, breathed shallowly, careful not to inhale more sand. The air was full of it, floating free on its own field of energy, a dense matrix which blurred any sharp delineation between river and air, smearing the surface into a fog of shifting density.

OK, she'd have to get higher, find a bigger rock, pull herself clear of the surface, find clearer air to breathe. That might not be super–easy but it shouldn't be impossible. The worst of the nightmare was over. Andy sighed with relief, allowed herself to relax.

Blue fire exploded in the river nearby.

The sharp hum of engines drilled painfully into her clogged ears.

She twisted in the water, stared up past the surface, past the edge of the boulder to which she was clinging.

*You've got to be kidding–*

Framed by the wildly tilting Black Falls, the last two Yellow flyers were bearing down on her, skimming the surface at a ridiculous speed, gun ports open, lining up for a killing shot.

Andy grabbed the rock and pulled herself closer, gulped a lungful of air and pushed herself underneath. Blue flame splashed the rock, sending her tumbling. She clung to the rock by her fingertips, feeling anger rising inside to (finally!) push aside the terror. Rising again to the surface as the sound of engines passed overhead, she jerked back and forth, trying to get a clear view of her surroundings. Shifting her gaze she spied a larger rock, one big enough to use as a platform, timed her movements, switched her grip to the rock as it passed nearby. She scrambled up onto the top surface as the sound of engines began to grow louder again. The rock wobbled precariously as her weight shifted its centre of balance. Andy clung on grimly, raised herself to a kneeling, then a standing position.

The first of the Yellow flyers was lining up for a second shot when she glimpsed it through the fog of sand.

A kind of frenzy took hold of her then; something beyond anger, beyond all thinking. What had she ever done to these people? She knew the answer of course: it wasn't what she'd *done*, it was what she *was.* Gripped by rage strong enough to make her teeth grind and her stomach clench, Andy scooped a baseball sized rock from the air nearby, waited until the Yellow flyer was close enough to see properly, then threw it at the pilot cabin as hard as she could.

*No more Mrs Nice Guy, bitches–*

The missile struck the yellow flyer, punching through the canopy and the stunned face of the Yellow Man in the pilot station in the same violent instant. Mustard–coloured blood exploded through the cabin, together with a surprised shriek, curtailed abruptly as the rock continued on a ruler–straight line through the craft to its engine compartment.

Andy blinked; in place of the Yellow flyer a sphere of blue energy crackled, just for a second, and then imploded.

The shockwave of recoiling air, river-sand and rock shrapnel punched Andy hard enough to make her ears ring as if from the enthusiastic ministrations of a chapel full of drunken bellringers; lifted her from her perch, blasted her clear of the fog of sand, the smeared surface of the river. For a split second she had a clear view of open air; a single heartbeat to take in the breathtaking beauty of the world around her.

Then, tumbling through clean air with no more rocks within reach to use as weapons, Andy found herself staring at the open gunports of the second Yellow flyer, as it lined up to exploit the opportunity the annihilation of its squad–mate had provided.

E's right, Andy thought. Tactics trump terror, every time.

What a shame she'd never be able to–

The river erupted, a concussion even more violent than the explosion of the flyer she'd destroyed. Something – some kind of animal – emerged. She was reminded of a breaching whale, but... no, it was bigger and weirder and its mouth was–

The creature erupted directly in the path of the last Yellow flyer, engulfed it in one huge bite, clamped down with the gargantuan maw. There was a sharp, resonant *thump* and the vehicle was replaced by a seething ball of blue energy. The *(sand gulper it was a thundering great)* strange and improbable creature inhaled the blue fire, smashed back into the river and was gone. A moment later there was a monumental *belch* from beneath the surface and a fountain of sand spouted high into the air.

The whole thing had taken less than a second.

Andy was still gaping, eyes as wide as the gulper's maw, when the tidal wave of sand and loose boulders smashed into her and the lights went out.

When the lights came on again, Andy found herself lying on solid ground, a spine of black rock. The River of the Dead was foaming nearby, the hiss of sand mixed with the clamour of clashing rocks. Three pairs of eyes were staring into hers; two human, one not so much.

Carter's worried expression smoothed into a grin. He sneaked a sideways look at

Burroughs and held out his hand. 'Pay me.'

Burroughs, whose expression had never been worried, said only, 'What took you so long? And where the devil did you get a *blue eye?'*

Carter reached towards her then.

'Don't touch it.' Burroughs held him back. 'You know what they can do.'

Carter drew back.

'It's hers now.'

Andy blinked. She lifted one hand to knuckle sand from her eyes. The hand was a fist. In it was a smooth lump of blue glass. A sapphire lens.

*The Eye of Erimem.*

The Princess' long face dipped closer, her expression fear and awe.

**'The weapon has chosen the warrior,'** her voice was a chest rattling whisper. She turned to Burroughs. **'We were right to test her.'**

'Were we?' The look on Burroughs' face strongly suggested otherwise.

**'Why else would she have been led to *this?'***

Andy struggled into a sitting position. The faces fell back to give her space.

'This?' Andy lifted the blue glass in her fist. 'This... this pebble... this is a weapon?'

**'A great weapon. A weapon of legend. One of only two known to the Red Men.'**

Andy looked at Burroughs and Carter.

Carter shrugged. Burroughs nodded thoughtfully.

**'This is the weapon that will free Maahes. That will kill The Lost Pharaoh.'**

'Kill Erimem? My friend?' Andy puffed out her cheeks. 'Not likely.'

Burroughs' eyes narrowed. 'The Lost Pharaoh is neither your friend, your comrade nor your ally. Did you learn nothing from the glass apple?'

Andy stared at Burroughs, appraising his expression. 'I learned things,' she told him. 'Maybe more than you thought.' She considered. *Maybe more than I'll ever know.*

Burroughs seemed about to respond. His gloved hand moved to his gun holster. Then Carter's hand touched his shoulder, arresting the movement.

'Edgar,' Carter said, softly, 'Have you forgotten why we're here?'

'No,' Burroughs scowled. 'I haven't forgotten.'

Andy stood, shoved the lens – the *Eye* – into her pocket and zipped it up. The blue glass was a weight there as heavy as the image in her mind. The huge face time had made of the wall of the tomb, temple, whatever it was.

Something had gone wrong on this world.

Time had forgotten its promise.

With the face of the enemy – her best friend – looming large (but not nearly as large as in the black city) in her mind, Andy turned to the river of the dead, and the spectacular view of Maahes unrolling into the distance. Somewhere beyond the red horizon, squeezed between mother sun and father dune, was Ferrohelios, City of the Iron Sun, last living metropolis of the planet Maahes, home of the Red Men. A storm was gathering there. A red storm. A war, one the *Three Amigos* thought they could stop. Andy knew better of course: the blue had other ideas; ideas it helpfully

remembered for her. She was on a different path now. But they did not need to know that.

Far out in the river, the sand–gulper breached, roared, belched dun metal and ceramic debris, was gone. Waves of sand and lumpy pebbles lapped at the shore.

'Well then,' Andy looked around for a decent outcrop of raft–stone, spied one, began walking towards it. 'I think we're going to need a bigger boat.'

**From the Account of Matthew Hansen**
**V**
**An Apparition of Truth**

Great. More *tunnels.*

A series of rock chambers arched up over Matt's head, branching and re–branching at every possible angle, creating a gloomy, threatening, three dimensional maze. He imagined it smelled bad in here. Like rotting meat. Like *(some sliced open corpse spilling steaming guts into)* something had been left out somewhere in the dark to die. But the smell went away almost immediately he detected it, a product of fear rather than any violent reality. Matt looked around. Holes in the roof let in narrow beams of scarlet sunlight. Heat shimmers puddled where the light hit the floor of the cave. Fine sand kicked up by his movements hung in the air, creating a dense haze that stung his eyes. Through watery tears he could see there were strange carvings in the chamber walls, weather worn and lost to time. Had this once been a dwelling place? An underground station, maybe? A basement garage? Someone's–

Wait – *weather worn?*

Matt stopped. Something scraped a raw nerve right at the edge of memory. *Weather worn?*

He turned over the thought for a moment, then began slowly to pick his way through a forest of rock formations, irregular arches rather than stalagmites or stalactites – of course: there was no water here, hadn't been for millennia, so why would there be water formations? – towards the nearest wall. And yeah, there were markings here, too right there were. Tens of metres of them, long swathes of broken *(first there were)* heiroglyphs punctuated by tumbled piles of scree, geological shearing or irregular openings in the chamber walls. Shapes that melted into the

bloodshot distance on every side. Markings that held *(then there were)* meaning for the tribe. For him too. Because these markings had been eroded all right – but not by the *(blue men, then there were red)* weather.

*(then there were)*

Blue memories swirled around his (*green men)* head. Inside and outside; outside and *(yellow instead)* inside. A time before this. A Matt before this. Somewhere off in the gloom rocks scraped as if being pushed aside by something very large. History: predator of time; victim of memory?

No. Not history. Not *that.*

Matt froze.

Something *else* was here. *The glass death*. Waiting for him. Just as first father told him it would be. The thing that would name him or kill him.

More rocks fell. Something moved in the sweaty fog of dust. Something large. Something fast and hungry.

His memories dissolved into a blue haze.

Living fulgarite erupted from the dust, thudding towards him, fogged glass crackling with blue fire as it pounded the rock to rubble.

*FFS–*

Matt lifted his four unbroken arms in defense as

if he was losing his mind. And even though that might not have been strictly true, that surely was what it *felt* like.

He was sitting on the high dock, higher by far above the desert than any Arizona rock formation, in the shadow of a docked corsair. The tribal fleet lay at anchor at his back and the world stretched out before him, father dune an endless wilderness under mother sun: the skin of the world pierced by distant spines of blue–black rock, the horizon unchanging as far as he could see. Somewhere out there, he knew, were other tribes. The *Bolu.* The *Galu.* The *Vanadinese.* The *Rhodiridi.* Glass seas and tablelands. The ancient perfection of blue cities. The crumbling ruins of those which followed; *the Noble Dead*. There were feasts and games and wars and glassdreams; there were Green Men and Yellow Men and Red Men and White, and soon there would be Blue Men. World without end, forever beyond his understanding. But not, perhaps, beyond his experience. His memories. His *blue* memories.

He sat on the high dock, as the crew loaded the corsair, repairing the sails and rigging, charging the cannon, bottling a year's storms in cold ceramic and blue glass, preparing for war. The crew ignored him – he was effectively *jeju,* alien and unknowable – so he lost himself in the ballast and weapons and songs, lost himself in the stink and howl of it, a war older than his father's firstfather, a war his glassdream showed him would end within a single generation – but not *how.*

Lost himself in exhilarating fear of the unknown.

Fear for his friends, even though he didn't have any friends.

Fear for his sister, even though no Green Man ever had a sister, nor ever could.

He tilted his face to the cinnamon sky, the gusting paprika breeze, looked down at the ground past his own legs, small and pale and wasted. Unnatural legs. Deformed

legs. *White Man's* legs.

He kicked his tiny, deformed heels against the wall on which he sat. That wall had stood for half a million years or more. Had bested storms and wars beyond knowing. At the lightest touch of those pale stumps, a chunk of stone flaked off and fell, tumbling into the distance. The *crack* of it stopped the corsair crew in their tracks, had them staring at him as if he was something they should be scared of. And why not? Was he not now a glassdreamer? Was he not alien to them? Fearful to them?

Did he not hold their future in his dreams?

Did he not hold the future of Matthanson in his dreams also? As Matthanson did in his?

'It's just Matt, nobwit.'

The sound of his own voice, thin and small as the wind in the dunegrass, made him uncomfortable. It sounded so sick. *He* sounded so sick.

Maybe he *was* sick. For what other glassdreamer had pulled his dream into the world of the living? The corsair crew were *right* to be scared of him. He was scared of *himself.*

Weary of introspection, he swung his legs back onto the top of the wall. He began to rise.

'So, guys,' he asked the crew at large, 'What do you navy types do that doesn't pass for navel examination around–'

The million year old wall, weakened by his idle kick, collapsed completely. He had barely a moment to register the dock falling apart before he and the corsair crew tumbled out into space and began the long fall to

the ground rose up to meet his face, rock chips exploded everywhere. His mind was on fire: blue fire; shredding his memories, tumbling past and future into an endless present; a mangled kaleidoscope of reasonless images.

*–feeding fish in first father's aquarium–*

*–falling from a rock raft into a river of sand–*

*–drowning in strange air under a brand-new sky–*

He reached out helplessly, felt lightning–shot glass beneath clawed fingers, living fulgarite that shattered as he squeezed and tore, bursting apart in a jagged storm of razor sharp shrapnel and crackling threads of blue fire.

*–screaming from two throats–*

*–moon falling–*

The thing didn't stop. Why would it? Breaking a single limb – and one small enough that he could grip it with tiny human hands, well, that was neither here nor there to a thing which lived for the sole pleasure of liquefying living minds and sucking them from their bodies, feeding on memory the way a spider feeds on juicy bug–innards. It was old beyond knowing, this thing made of glass and lightning, and it hurt with a deep and abiding pain, the kind of pain the merely living could never comprehend, its only comfort the pleasure of feeding. It yearned to feed. It *burned*. But even the feeding was no more than a transitory distraction, the brief moment of

satiation barely remembered past the hideous act.

*–the hell out of my–*

*–head you bastard bloody–*

But it was there. It was *in him.* As if everything else he'd suffered wasn't enough already. It's mind – oh, but it had a *mind* – was inside his, and his was inside

*(somewhen, somewhere, out in the)*

blue fire there, in his head, how it burned. It burned worse than any truth. For it was many truths. Its truth was legion. And its truth was now *his.*

Consumed, he screamed.

Consuming, he shrieked.

It was the *glassdreaming,* and it was without any shadow of doubt *not* for those as small as he

sighed, somehow manging to resist the urge to close his eyes, turn on his heels and just toss the entire shitshow off a ledge.

That's *right.*

*Another* lecture from helicopter–mum number three; the shiny–sis wannabe.

'… so the problem is,' the Moroccan chick was telling him, 'You're too dangerous to have around unattended. They allowed us some leeway because the Green Man we saved vouched for us. That situation has now changed.'

Matt scrambled to get his brains in some semblance of order.

'The dock... those guys on the boat–'

'The corsair is undamaged. It drifted for half a day before the toolsman rigged a temporary mast and he and the cook sailed it back. And only three of the crew were injured in the fall to the ground. You're lucky–'

*'–lucky!–'*

The Moroccan chick stared at Matt until he got the message and shut up. She gave it another few seconds, just to be sure, before continuing.

'They talked about executing you. Both of us. They discussed it *extensively.*'

Matt felt a sick churn in his gut. He'd *fallen.* Half a *kilometre.* He'd *injured–*

'So why aren't I... I mean we–?'

'They did not kill us,' the Moroccan chick explained, as if to a child, 'Because they are not sure that they *can* kill us. They say they have never seen anything like us in living memory. I think they're lying about that.' Her gaze shifted, as if to a distant horizon, then locked immovably back onto him. 'In any case they have decided to make you part of the tribe. To ensure your loyalty – and their safety.'

Matt said nothing. He kicked idly at the ground.

'You will face a trial the Green Men call *the death of glass*. If you complete the trial successfully you will be part of the tribe, no longer subject to supervision or threat. They will embrace us and we will be one people. Until then you stay in here.' She glanced around the ancient squarecave. 'Under guard.'

'Well how jolly super,' the churn in Matt's gut became a deep black sinkhole. 'And what if I don't take their test? What if I happen to believe interpersonal violence is no answer to anything?' He sighed. As if anyone here were *that* reasonable. 'I mean, I

could be open to other solutions. We could just leave.'

'The Green Men do not seem as if they would be at all *open* to the idea of us *just leaving*.' The Moroccan chick's expression was suddenly bleak. 'Pacifism does not appear to be part of their way of being. And there are far more violent peoples and things on this world than the Green Men.'

This was old news and Matt tuned it out. He stared into space, someone else's memories swimming around in his head. Yeah. That was right. Swimming around in his head like a shoal of bright blue *piranha*, tearing up everything in sight. Everything that was *him.* Tearing up his memories and *eating them.*

The memories slowly turned themselves into thoughts and finally into words. Blue words. *Even those who live through the death of glass don't survive it.*

He perched on a slab of stone about the size of a flatbed truck. The stone was ancient, its function as a table acquired more recently. Conglomerate in the rock might have been a billion years old; the table itself was barely older than modern–day America.

'They want to make me one of *them.* A *glassdreamer.* They hate those guys. But they can't live a day without them. If they make me a 'dreamer I can do anything. There'll be no comeback. Dreamers are the highest authority here, even though they're shunned by everyone and can't even tell *jeju* what to do. The whole tribe will hate me. But they'll have to live with me no matter what I get up to. It's not a solution, man. It's just... what's the word... *expedient.'*

The blue memories were fading, sparks on bonfire night. Matt refocused on the *here–and–now.* The Moroccan chick was staring at him. He couldn't help thinking that her expression was somehow... *tactical.* Re–assessing him. Sizing him up as if for future use – again.

'I did not realise you were so politically astute.' She appeared to consider the thought. 'You hide it very well.' She thought for a moment and then added, 'Call me a man again and I *will* scar you.'

'Whatever.' *And if you think being besties with the shiny gives you any kind of admin rights – think again.*

Matt rubbed his eyes. His hands were still bright blue from the healing goop the big guy had spit on them. He sighed tiredly. As if he didn't have enough parental issues already to thrill an entire cadre of school counselors half way to nirvana. Now, apparently, he had the big guy's as well. Which was just a complete and utter packing crate of crazy considering the Green men had no parents, only *fathers*. And even that was the nearest word in Matt's lexicon to the blue memories setting up camp in his head since leaving Argelium.

'It doesn't matter. I can throw a six–pack of these guys half way to Surrey without breaking a sweat. So... how are they proposing to make me take their jolly old test again, remind me?'

Her expression grew – if that was possible – even harder. 'The Green Man we saved – your *buddy,* the one who vouched for us, who saved our lives – if you don't take the test they will hold him responsible for your actions.'

Matt pulled up short. 'What do you think they'll do to him?' Honestly, he did not

want to hear the answer to that question.

'It has been indicated that the punishment for your wrongdoings could include death.' The Moroccan chick hesitated a moment, then added. 'That does not seem either morally equitable or tactically astute to me. However...' Another pause, this one longer. '… the Green Men do not themselves appear to be either morally equitable or tactically astute.'

Matt folded his arms and closed his eyes. Blue memories swirled around his head.

He gave himself to a moment of contemplation. Just how accurate *was* the Moroccan chick's assessment of Green tactics – accurate enough to risk their lives on?

'Dude, we're on an alien *planet.* The Green Men could be highly moral *and* tactically astute – just in a way we're not familiar with. Did you think of that?'

The Moroccan chick appeared to give Matt's observation serious consideration.

*That's right clubbers. Fear the badass beat of my logic dru–*

'I have been instructed in battle by master tacticians – the best warriors in the world. I have never lost a war.'

This statement was so preposterous Matt opened his eyes and angled a cold glance her way. 'And how many actual wars have you fought, again, remind me?' Until now he'd thought no–one could be as mammoth a reproduction–bag as the shiny–sis. Clearly that theory had just been tossed out of the lab window. But was the Moroccan chick really the executive branch she thought she was?

It didn't matter: his words had clearly struck a nerve.

The Moroccan chick stared. Her reply was soft and cold, edged with threat. 'Take the test. Do *not* fail. I do not want to be the one who tells your sister how you died.'

Matt rubbed his face with the palms of his hands.

'Honestly? That doesn't help.'

'Then consider this,' Her expression hardened. 'After the test you will be a glassdreamer. A *White* glassdreamer. No–one on this planet will be more qualified to find Andy and Ibrahim; save them, if they need saving; and find a way to get us all home afterwards.'

Matt emitted a slow, frustrated sigh.

'Reluctantly, I am forced to admit that *does* help.'

A long, quiet moment stretched out between them. *Master tactician; yeah, yeah. Whatever.*

'When is this test then,' Matt mumbled eventually. *Y'know, so I can, like, squeeze it into my busy schedule of being, like, lost in space, man.*

Before the Moroccan chick could answer, two giant green forms shouldered into the squarecave.

Matt shook his head tiredly.

'Right now o'clock?' Matt pushed himself off the stone table. 'Well, sure, I could be free.'

Making no effort at all to hide his peak level of *no–shit–left–to–give*, he

*screeched as glass limbs thrashed in his grip, hammering him left and right, battering him against the cave wall, the strangely familiar words carved there. Sharp sand slashed across his face and arms, his head thudded against something hard enough to make his whole body vibrate. Blue fire burst close by. Lighting flashed in his head. Flashed again and he*

*was watching dad's fish when the sis tried to explain how mum had died that afternoon in hospital.*

*She'd got the call while Matt was asleep, had snagged a neighbour to watch out for him while she was gone. How absolutely shiny of her. Hadn't she thought he might have wanted to be there?*

*It didn't matter anyway. He didn't want to be there. Wouldn't have gone even if she'd begged him to. Didn't want to see the withered thing which had once been his mother. The half collapsed sack of rotten banana skin, split by tubes and wires, ablated by useless chemicals. A shredded, weeping coccoon from which everything of any meaningful importance departed weeks before the desiccated remains at long last expired.*

*Matt knew what had occurred the moment he heard the front door close. Avoiding the sitter, he skyped some cash from the shiny's bill–drawer, scored a brick of weed the size of a half–bat from a prick he knew who occasionally hung around the school gates, and took a walk along the canal, where he spent the small hours of the morning beside the black, greasy swells, rolling cones by the light of his smartphone, getting high and shrieking into the black place in his head.*

*The phone was hot and sweaty in his hand. Or maybe it was his hand that was hot and sweaty, Matt couldn't tell and didn't care. It had been given to him by his mother when he was small, 'For emergencies.' Well – here was an emergency, no messing, and what use was the useless piece of tin now? Could it bring mum back from the buggering dead? 'Course it couldn't, the useless piece of–*

*Quite suddenly the phone rang. The display lit up with the shiny's number. Something broke in Matt then. He threw the phone down among the weeds, stamped on it furiously, punted the busted–ass remains into the canal. Incredibly, the phone was still ringing as it sank out of sight. The gurgling sound that the ringing became was like a death rattle. And the dying light from the broken screen, descending into endless greasy night, looked like the departing soul of his dead mother, vanishing among the oily reflections of the*

*stars made of blue flame burst in his head. The thing made of fire and glass and hunger had him now. It tugged at his mind, pulled his memories out like … oh, like a candyfloss swirl at a travelling fair, say. Pulled his personality out with them. He (what was his name?) was losing his*

*(five year old self gazed at the fish as Andy told him his)*
*memories were wrong it didn't happen she*
*(was drowning his sister)*
*didn't die like that no because he wasn't*

*remembering it right he*
*(was drowning)*
*wasn't*
*(drowning in a river of sand sharp as)*
*two mouths she was*
*(screaming from)*
*remembering anything right anymore just the bits the thing devouring his mind didn't want; the wet, gristly bits of memory it spat out like obscene half–digested owl pellets on the floor of the cave for him to try to cram back in his*

*head except they wouldn't fit no matter how hard he*

*flinched at the sound of the shiny's voice. 'Matthew Hansen, you may identify as anything up to and including a pagan fertility god but that doesn't mean the law empowers you to build a scale model Stonehenge out of your lunchbox cheese.'*

*Matt frowned. 'It's not to scale.'*

*In truth he no more identified as a pagan than any other type of human being. But that was their problem. Mum would have got it. Mum would have joined in. Mint sauce bottle poised to add moss, Matt studied the partly assembled Red Leicester diorama laid out before him on the kitchen table, then flashed on an old Future Shock in which some stone-age kid playing with rocks, called to heel by* his *helicopter parents, turned out to be – from the perspective of a human-sized neolithic observer, anyway – the god of giants laying the groundwork for Stonehenge. Matt uttered a long–suffering sigh, forever the sound of the disenfranchised. He'd had such plans for Cheesehenge – right down to the Gorgonzola bluestones – but shiny would never get the scale-change.*

*Bugger it.*
*Other days would come and his blue*
*(cheese it was)*
*glass vision would*

*stand beside his mother's body in a too–bright hospital room as the monitors ticked down to silence and darkness and there, as shiny–sis watched with horror, he took a (curve-pronged cheese knife) scalpel from the (what was a) surgical instrument tray (doing here) on the bedside table, flayed the skin from her skull and draped her dripping face like a floppy, blank–eyed mask over his own. Somewhere nearby the shiny–sis was screaming from two mouths, hands covering her eyes like some b–movie horror queen. He didn't like that, the racket simply wasn't respectful and anyway she simply wouldn't; so he selected a coarse grade cheese knife from the tray and he cut away the bits of her*

*sense of scale was off the chart in every direction. It wasn't a river, it was a sea. Or it felt like one anyway. A sea made of sand. A waterfall on a world without water. And it was falling through bluffs and canyons as vast as any (he'd) she'd seen in Arizona.*

*But this was no natural landscape, or if it was it was only now becoming one. It was the ruin of a city so vast it would barely fit in (his) her head. Blue fire flashed nearby: the rock–raft dipped and whirled. The last of the Yellow flyers, the one they hadn't seen for a while, the ship she thought Carter and the Princess had shot down, angled towards them. Blue fire flashed again, tearing chunks from the nearest parts of the city, tipping the raft almost vertical, sending cracks through the surface, which split suddenly into a number of pieces. She fell, thudded hard into the rock, half suffocated by waves of sand, her fingertips digging into deep splits in the surface. A vortex opened in the sandfalls and the tumbling platform she was clinging to was sucked sideways into the*

*ruin of a face, her own face scarred by time or life or war, stared back at (him) her from a place of such hatred and envy that it was all he could do to swing the shattered khopesh in a final two–handed blow. His (her) wounds burned like fire, like blue fire, but he'd (she'd) been well trained: if he gave up now the spirit of Antranak would return from heaven to beat him mercilessly as it had when he was a child, and his father was still ruler of Egypt. He was nothing if not a Pharaoh and he would not surrender to this impostor, this witch wearing his (first–father's) face. He would take the face, by Osiris, and wear it as his own. He raised the khopesh above the fallen woman, the Lost Pharaoh, Queen of Two Worlds, and without hesitation plunged*

*out of the sky with a sonic boom that cracked the ground a microsecond ahead of its own impact. The ugly black moon slammed into the crust of the planet with barely less than extinction velocity, destroying a continent, bringing new life to a desiccated sea–bed drowning in ships sailing violent skies under fire from sandragons spitting gossamer wings torching flesh and bone trapped in the cavern maze with a living glass mindkiller and a green assassin red assassin father dune Ferrohelios shieldstone wall squarecave children's playground shrieking from two cat mouths assgravy Camberwell shiny carrot mum gone dad gone frenzied army of–*

*–slashing his own face with a–*
*–riding a rock raft down a–*
*–shattered moon falling–*
*–red ships blue fire–*
*–green assassins–*
*–screaming–*
*-from two-*

*(shiny–sis was)*

*–glass killer–*

*(drowning)*

*–feeding–*

*(in)*

*–feeding–*

*(sand)*

*–FEEDING–*

*And then it was*

*gone. Memory died.*

*(all of the colours, none of them*

*white) glass and blue lightning filled his world.*

*He tried to scream but he'd forgotten how to do that too.*

Matt crawled from the cave lathered in snot, mewling helplessly. His eyes were wide open but he saw no*(every)*thing. He was dragging something behind him by the stump of one arm. A Green Man. One of two sent to kill him. Green but not *green. Arsenium* killers. Possessors. Assassins. *Colourless.* How did he know this? Erimem pushed through the crowd of Green Men and ran to him. How did he know her name was Erimem? How did he know she was a Pharaoh, that she was over three thousand years old, that she'd once travelled time and space and couldn't remember what *(I bet I can remember what)* she'd done there? The killer he dragged behind him still lived. All to the good. *One enemy may be spared to sing of your victory. Yes Antranak. The others must be killed. Publicly, violently and immediately. An instruction to future enemies, do you understand Erimem? Yes Antranak, I understand.*

There was a sudden shocking blow to the side of *(her)* his face. Someone was shouting. Erimem. What was *(he)* she saying? There were words but–

'You're not Moroccan. How could I miss that?' Matt's voice was *(Matt, his name was)* happy and dreamlike. His chin ran with drool. He stared at nothing in particular. 'I'm a dumbass poopyface,' he concluded eventually.

He suddenly became aware there was a whole entire planet rushing wildly up towards him.

It didn't look much like it wanted to be friends.

The big guy reached him before the planet, stepping over Erimem and scooping him into one vast, almost comforting hand.

The hand folded over him and with it, darkness.

It occurred to Matt, as he'd trailed disaffectedly after the big guy (still dragging around his ridiculously heavy blue glass monolith) and the Moroccan chick (still

dragging around her equally heavy helicopter–parental frown) through the tumbled blocks of Green tribal land scattered within the gap–toothed shieldwall, that one could be smashed out of one's tiny mind on the finest designer drugs known to man – more or less liquified in fact – and here on Maahes one would barely notice.

For a start there was the sheer *size* of everything. And the *age* of everything. And the utter freakology of everything *else*. But even that lexicon of the bizarre couldn't get your homework done. *Everything* here was *The Maxx,* not just size, age or general–purpose wierdness (and that included the half–crazed *jeju* clogging up his me–space with the curious buzz of a Wembley stadium capacity crowd on a stinky summer day; the motionless pack of tribal elders giving him the Nietsche abyssal once–over; the fleet of vicious–looking cloud-cutters and corsairs moored atop the thousand–meter high docks under the honking great hammer of mother sun...). No. It was more than all this. It was as if every experience of any dozen lives, past and future both, had been stuffed into every waking moment of his.

And was that so far from the truth when all was said and done? The Comicon mind–meld he and the big guy had shared... well... much like the planet itself, it was the gift that kept on giving: a moment of *Joy–Ren!* charging out across his emotional horizons faster than any rules of the heart could possibly allow. So absolute and exhaustive was this head–migration that Matt could no longer meaningfully distinguish between his and the big guy's memories. More: something seemed to be narrowing the gap between past and future so that time itself – linear time anyway; time as experienced by every human being who'd ever lived including, until very recently, Matt himself – was ever more quickly becoming (ha ha) a thing of the past.

But the process didn't stop there, if you could believe that. Not only was he experiencing events from his own and the big guy's past and future, but now other images and sensations were starting to bleed through... visions of people he did not know, had never met, perhaps would only meet in whatever unfathomable version of the future the blue glass Glee–mashup had left to him. Most disturbing of all some of these blinding–edge moments seemed as if they *might* belong to the shiny; as if they *might* be about mum and dad... memories of *Matt himself* from someone else's perspective – from *shiny sis's* perspective – and how immensely *freak-a-delic* was *that,* Scoob? The pure pain and sheer confusion of these unwanted memories drove a chrome *T-1000* spike into the space behind his eyes, made everything go fuzzy–edged and rainbow–hued, turned the familiar world into strange shapes, like those visible through the thick edge of someone else's glasses: grotesquely misshapen, painfully hard to keep in focus; awful in the most intimate of ways. In the end Matt decided it would almost certainly be best to simply release the whole acid–casualty–patient–zero trip back into the wild – anywhere but his own head would do – but when he tried, he found the wild had other ideas.

And so it seemed to Matt – even while he was just about as utterly vaporised as a room–temperature solid could be – that he was at the same time living in a more–or–less perpetual state of sobriety achievable only by newly minted infants or the factualist ballbreakers of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* – a book, incidentally, which had never made more sense to Matt than *right–this–actual–minute.*

To sum up: he'd *never* needed a cone *so* badly.

So here he was, on the run from your actual Reality Police, moving faster than a speeding bullet in every wrong direction there was. And what did that say about his life, exactly? What would first–father or shiny sis have to say about it? Did he care, even? No he most assuredly did not. Not on their world or this.

Somewhere off among the hills and hummocks of *anti*–Hobbiton, the Moroccan chick was all hugger–mugger with the big guy. Matt himself had been unceremoniously stashed in a squarecave which seemed permanently entrenched by curious onlookers of the green, four–plus–metre–high persuasion. For the most part his visitors seemed content to stare, which here on the ground apparently meant stare–with–unashamed–curiosity–and–no–feel–for–privacy through every open window and door in the swanky uptown property, casually jostling for the best view at a level of personal violence that would give Jason Bourne himself pause for thought. The tribal *jeju* (a word he now realised translated to "recently assembled," with considerably more accuracy than "child") apparently thought nothing of wriggling between their elders' legs for a better view before being elbowed aside or more often simply picked up by whatever limb was available and hurled back over the crowd in favour of the nearest designated grownup. Mutterings and murmurrings rumbled like distant earthquakes around and about. For a sensitive lad such as himself, Matt thought, it was all a just a bit more than a bit on the bit–too–much side.

This being the case, Matt decided a bit of skulking was in order. He enjoyed skulking. He was good at it. There was a lot here to skulk around. To stare moodily at. To break the fashionably–post–modern–fourth–wall over. And it wasn't as if *The–Well–of–the–Krazee–Juice* had yet run dry. Heck, no. Life on Maahes was, in point of fact, still hosing him down with major league winners-cup cup–winning krazee.

First things first, though. Time to exit the auditorium.

Matt explored, slipping quietly in and out of the rooms in the squarecave, weaving between the huge stone blocks, pushing through rainbow–coloured draperies which divided the dwelling into different areas. Every space was empty. Matt didn't need to ask why. His new memories provided the answer. Right now he and the Moroccan chick were guests. Whoever lived here had given up their home for him, temporarily anyway. Matt had a pretty good idea how they probably felt about that, if his blue memories of the last visit to the tribe by a White Man were anything to go by. One of the spaces contained a huge flat slab being used as a table, laden with bowls and dishes containing herbs and spices. Matt poked around, sampled a few pinches of this and that, snagged a handful of something blue that smelled and tasted like the finest herbal refreshment imaginable and jammed it into his pocket. Eventually he found what he was looking for. Deep in the maze of long–eroded rectangular chambers a squarish breach in the chamber wall opened onto a dark, echoing void. Lift shaft? Rubbish chute? Who cared? Spiced currents of air flowed through the opening. A lintel hung askew overhead. No–one going back thirty generations could remember when it had hung straight. Matt squeezed his head and shoulders into the darkness, then twisted to look up and down. Down was darkness,

cold and dry and tomb–like. But overhead there was a glimmer of daylight, pale rose, a shimmering heat haze. Matt peered upwards. The light was probably about as high above him as the top of the Empire State building. Then again on this world he could leap such buildings in a single bound, more or less, so what did *that* matter?

Wriggling the rest of the way into the void Matt scooped out some handholds in the rock and began to climb.

*Hansen has left the building.*

One long climb later he'd just about left the planet as well. He lounged on top of the building shielding his eyes from the mother sun while chewing on a thick wad of whatever awesome spice he'd snagged from the kitchen below and wondering how the hell a *city* could look so very like the clichéd Monument Valley landscape captured by so many desperate–for–cash photographers in Amazon calendars and Youtube videos. In truth it wasn't a city anymore, hadn't been for thousands of generations. The Green Men who lived here were only distantly aware that others – very different others – before them had once occupied the same tribal land. The glassdreamers knew, of course, but their knowedge was thin on the ground these days, as hard to grasp as fog on a sunny morning, eroding as surely as their home itself. There would come a time, Matt knew, when everything that was old would be lost forever. Like the Moroccan chick's temples, or the Tull vid he'd watched with... what was her–? Oh yeah, *Mallory*; Ian Anderson and his stork–like flute performance. How strange it had seemed when he'd watched it with Mallory at the canal. How completely banal it seemed now. Time changed everything. Time was merciless. More so here than anywhere else. Because unlike the world of his birth, time here was a stoned, senile, crusty old rock star who clearly gave not a fig for the idea of doing things in a sensible, orderly fashion; which would, in short, rather accomplish the everyday standing on one leg and playing the freaking flute.

Matt considered the people of Maahes. The Green tribes living in other ruins or cliff caves or desert warrens or nomadic tent cities or spread out along the shores of the great sand rivers and glasslakes of the father dune. The Red men in the last living city of Ferrohelios. The Yellow clans occupying the equatorial firelands. The Tree men who lived in the ferocious jungles surrounding the planet's ancient hydroforges. Life beyond measure, almost beyond knowing. Their memories and feelings intruded upon his own, lives and deaths a churning undertow, dragging him sideways into the past and future at the same time. Those same feelings and memories cycled through his ever more stoned psyche in dizzying loops. Or maybe that was the weed. Honestly, so long as it came with a half–decent measure of chill, Matt didn't care. All he knew was that his personal hard drive was pretty much rammed to the gills and badly in need of an overnight defrag, as if *that* was going to happen any time soon.

For some reason Matt found himself thinking about a dented humming top he'd once discovered by the canal, an abandoned kid's toy, decorated with peeling rusted faces and what looked through all the corrosion something like a blue police telephone box. He'd become obsessed by the top, unable to stop spinning it and tipping it around on its base, fascinated by how reluctantly it shifted its axis to a new

vector, the force it exerted back against his hand when he tried to move it. Right now he felt exactly like the toy: unwilling to move, determined not to, but in the end powerless to resist the overhelming forces ranged against him. He'd bullied the top until the internal mechanism had seized up and the shell disintegrated in a flaky shower of rust. Given the pressures piling up, he wondered if he would disintegrate in the same way or if, by some miracle, he might survive.

If so he had no idea how.

Matt kicked back on the half–million year old city rooftop, waggling his fingers in front of the sun; watching high, thin clouds form and re–form, an endless time–lapse tapestry which ebbed and flowed, and grew and spread, as the blue spice took hold.

New worlds and old washed in and out of his head.

Somewhere deep in the nest the glassdeath waited.

Closer still, an altogether different kind of threat loomed. He could sense it, sense the thoughts behind it, the smooth, cold, reptilian drive, the lack of emotion. Glassdreamers? No. Dreamers' thoughts were different, more colourful. These were monochrome, colourless black and white, no shades of grey, slipping quietly around him, filling the maze of tunnels and chambers, the lair of the glassdeath, with a very different intention. Something clear. Matt was aware of the stalkers visualising his death. His body crushed by Green fists, or gutted by blue glass blades, or simply vaporised by blue fire from a fully charged glassgun. They were no strangers to him, the owners of these thoughts. He had heard tales of them. *Many* tales.

*Arsenium* killers. Not one but two.

The same breed as those who'd tried to kill them back in Argelium.

Their minds were similar: highly trained, focused; but, to Matt, quite distinct. Two subtly different coldnesses, stalking him through chambered rock warmed by the sun, two minds bent upon a single goal: his death. The same resolution, yes, yet... there *was* a difference. *Something* of those two minds was *unlike*... something... no. He couldn't put his finger on it. Not quite.

Matt tried to process this knowledge. He was no stranger to hatred, be it classmate, teacher or any other tribal prejudice*;* whoever the source, the net effect was the same: fear, violence, an ass–kicking for Matt. Not here though. The *(twinned but not identical, no, not)* minds winding coldly and purposefully in his wake did not want to hurt, to shame. Their objective was more permanent. They were straightforward things, these minds, and the Greens who carried them. But that did not mean they would be easy to avoid. And if they were hard to avoid, they would be harder still to defeat.

Matt moved, slowly, quietly, reaching out with another's knowledge into the maze, seeking the true path, the death of glass. Matt might not be able to avoid or defeat those seeking him. The glassdeath was his only hope, the thing that waited in the centre of the maze. To lead those killers further into the nest; to lure them into grasp of the thing he must survive. That was the only way he would endure.

If the glassdeath did not claim him first.

Matt moved, slowly, cautiously, and the cold thoughts followed.

Sensing their approach, the glassdeath stirred, propelled to hunger by the nearness of minds; of food. Matt felt it reaching out, probing delicately, preparing to pounce. He knew how fast death came in these tunnels; remembered it from generations of Green men before him. Remembered it from those who had failed, and died, their minds consumed.

Here too was spillage, the mental equivalent of a lair full of gnawed remains, blood splashed bones. The closer Matt got to the glassdeath, the more acutely he was aware of the killers following him.

*Arsenium.*

City, clan, tribe, person... Matt could not penetrate that deeply, not yet. The name carried with it not only terror but also respect. *Arsenium* was age. *Arsenium* was potency. *Arsenium* was purity. Death was its goal and its reward. Ahhhh, but *why?*

Matt slowed his steps, creeping now, ducking under rock formations he could no longer see, hands brushing long lines of inscriptions etched into the ancient rock his palms and fingertips could no longer feel. His shoes crunched on loose scree and sand, but he could not hear himself move.

His senses were their senses. His memories theirs.

Joined through glassdeath, waiting to feed.

He remembered–

*The Tower of Arsenium rose as if to pull down the sky. Beyond the night was inky black, tinged with mauve, scattered with cold, hard points. Stars, as hard and merciless as the killers who trained here, the mystics who concealed this place from the world, the ones who ruled.*

*A thousand generations the Tower had stood, ageless, encysted, cut off from the world but connected to it by threads of blood, of lives cut short, of minds curtailed or redirected to a greater purpose than their own.*

*Matt moved silently for years within the Tower, washed in blood, never speaking, only hearing, acquiescing to the minds which governed and directed the lives of those who obeyed.*

*Matt was the strong arms of Arsenium. His the skill, the respect, the dedication.*

*His the life to end life.*

*To shape the destiny of a world.*

*Trained in Arsenium, raised in Arsenium, fed in Arsenium, and finally birthed from Arsenium, the only world he knew, expelled, never to return, yet entrusted with the most precious cargo a killer could ever carry: the death of another.*

*The death of a White Man, The Lost Pharaoh.*

*Of all who glassdreamed her.*

*Of all who served her.*

Shards of blue glass lay scattered throughout the tunnels. Matt scooped one up without knowing it, feeling his own movements. They weren't his own movements, really, but those of another, one of the many who came before. Had that lonely

dreamer lived or died? What had they felt as death, or destiny, had closed in? Matt did not know; memory was so intertwined now it was impossible to separate himself from the other. From this time or that. From even the *glassdeath*, waiting to feed, knowing nothing but hunger, even as it allowed other minds around it to merge and become one, the better for it to feed.

But Matt was not of this world, not of Maahes. Matt was human, of Earth. A White Man.

And if memory was impenetrably conjoined here it was no more of an inconvenience than being smashed on weed, or that one (terrifying and never–to be repeated) time he'd ridden Charlie the white horse. Everything he knew or felt he knew, was completely within his own control, as it had been that one–time–never–to–be–repeated; within his control yet utterly beyond it. He was a state of weightless void within which his own movements could be directed in a way others made impossible elsewhere. Teachers wanted to direct his life; politicians to control it; the shiny sis was their strong right arm and she didn't even realise it. She was old enough and smart enough to buy the lie but not to recognise it. And control of Matt Hansen being the one thing Matt Hansen was most assuredly not into; *no way, Hosé; no way indeed,* he continued on his way while his mind continued on its, each aware of its separation from the other in the same way, and perhaps at the same level, that a pollen seed may be aware of its separation from the parent plant by a soft breath of wind. Aware but unable to affect.

Matt was in the drift, his mind falling apart.

*Like, wow, Scoob.*

Part of his mind was not his own any more. Part of Matt was *Arsenium* now, killer and victim indivisible, invisible, visible.

Isible.

Is a ball.

Is it? Is it a ball? Or is it something else? Woah. What an utterly bong–ass thing to

suddenly felt an electifying force move through his body, belly out from toes to head, to fingertips. He chuckled. The chuckle shivered through his being, defining it, wind in trees. He had them. He had their memories. He had the *why* of them.

Now all he had to do was–

But they had him too, Matt realised, as those cold minds drove bodies with singular intention towards him through the bloodshot dimness of the caves.

Matt felt panic surge through him, a greasy black canal tide. A drowning cat canal tide. A

slow tsunami, creeping fast as any fighter–jet. And how could it be so (fast) slow when

the killers were (slow) faster. Much faster, by

far and near and near and far and

life and death in

divisible in

visible
in

the rock chambered maze erupted with living fulgarite; crazed glass, old beyond knowing, full of blue fire and hunger.

Matt, fighting for his life on three fronts, laughed, and reached, and grasped and *pulled*.

Glass splintered. Flesh tore.

Matt woke up.

There was a warm breeze, not uncomfortable, and the sky was a summery blue.

*(hang on)*

No. Not blue. Red. But it looked blue. So...

*(glasses, something about)*

Oh yeah.

Matt suddenly grinned. He remembered this experiment they'd done at school one year. He'd been given a pair of glasses that turned everything you saw upside down, and been told to wear them all the time. For several days life had been – well, just exactly as you might imagine. Then one morning, to his complete surprise, Matt had woken up to find the world inexplicably upside down. He'd put the glasses on – and the world was suddenly the right way up again. His science teacher had explained gleefully that his eyes saw the world upside down every day but his brain learned to put the image the right way up for his convenience. This experiment was proof that the human brain can easily learn to interpret new patterns of data with sufficient incentive, and was thereby evidence that even Matt could deliver homework on time in future, also for his own convenience, haha.

Child torture in the name of science? Almost certainly. But Matt didn't care. Seeing the world for what it really was, was just too much of a laugh.

Now he looked into the red sky and saw blue. His brain had learned a new pattern.

He was no–longer in the *upside–down.*

He was a *glassdreamer.*

Matt got up, and washed the grimy sweat from his face. The sand felt good, cool against his palms, refreshing in the same way water from a tap had once felt. Matt chuckled. Then he giggled. Matt never giggled. He couldn't remember ever giggling. *Merde, baby*. Why had he never felt like giggling, or chuckling, or laughing like this before? He literally could LOL, BTW, and didn't that just, like, *blow your mind, Scoob?*

He sat down on the *(stone slab)* bed and *(the Moroccan)* Erimem *(chick her name was)* strolled into the squarecave. There was a grin on her face roughly the size of Mars. Or Maahes, let's say.

'Hey,' Matt offered. 'Erimem,' he added, surprised at how pleasant his voice could sound when he wasn't acting like an ass.

Erimem perched casually beside Matt on the slab.

'You lived,' she said simply. 'Good.'

'So what gives, giggles?'

Erimem said nothing, and Matt realised she was unclear as to his meaning. He gestured beyond the squarecave. 'Out there, I mean. I survived the test, right? I even dragged one of those assassin guys out with me. OK, so he might have been a bit on the battered side but, y'know, still alive.'

'The assassin will soon be dead. If the *Thalu* are to be believed. Killed with the appropriate ritual and his body *fed to the father dune*.'

Matt noticed peripherally that Erimem seemed to pronounce things in italics when she was reproducing them verbatim without understanding the context or meaning. He realised this somewhere at the back of his mind, in the same moment his eyes popped open with surprise at what she'd said. Then again, why should he have expected any different? He knew what the Green tribes thought about *Arsenium.*

'You should be pleased. The *Thalu* plan to honor you with his death. At the glass–raising ceremony.'

'Glass– shit, I forgot. Is the big guy still with us?'

'He is.' Erimem shifted position. 'He too has attained great honor. The Thalu have never seen such a piece of dreaming glass as the piece he dragged here.' She nodded thoughtfully, as if turning over the thought. 'The two of you seem to have... caused... *quite a stir.'* She seemed to choose her next words with some care. 'We must tread with caution in this place. It seems to me that the Thalu may think of us as a weapon they can use in a war we may have just made worse.'

Matt turned the thought over, not entirely comfortably.

'I imagine we will find out the truth at the glass–raising ceremony.'

'Talking of which, when is the gig in question?'

He knew the answer, of course, even Erimem stood up and pulled aside the tent–cloth covering the entrance to the squarecave. *Right–now*–o'clock. What other time was there?

Matt sighed. 'Not much for hanging around, these guys, are they?'

The glass–raising ceremony lasted twelve days (weeks? months?) by Matt's count – admittedly a somewhat shaky count beyond the first week due to what felt like the spice–based vaporisation of his entire central nervous system, from the brain on out, *can u dig it?*

To begin with it was interesting enough. The tribesmen gathered, joined in competitive fighting, sang a lot and got stoned even more. But after only a few hours the novelty wore off. It wasn't that he was tired but, shit, had he seen it all before or what? After that Matt's boredom only intensified. He considered making his excuses and leaving. The chances of him surviving that intact, he knew, were just about the same as those of a snowflake surviving a fall down a Christmas chimney onto a

roaring fire. No. His best option was to edge towards the back of the crowd as unobtrusively as he could, then hope no–one would notice when he clocked out.

Matt began to move – but if he hoped to go unnoticed he was much mistaken.

Pressure on his arm halted his movement. Erimem. Somehow Matt was not surprised at the strength of that grip. 'If you leave the ceremony now you will insult the *Thalu*. We need allies if we are to save Andy and Ibrahim.'

*Was this woman ever wrong?*

Matt wanted to argue. He *really* wanted to. But it would have been futile. There was no way a glassdreamer – especially a White glassdreamer – could ever leave without being noticed. In which event the social mores governing tribal life here would makes things sufficiently complicated – not to mention *violent* – that he might *never* find a way back from it.

Fate, memory and Erimem all told Matt he was in this for the long haul, disco-biscuits and all.

He sighed, fighting the sick sensation rising in his stomach.

'Yeah, I get it.'

Erimem dropped her hand.

Matt scowled, sighed, snagged some blue spice and stoked the fires in his head.

On the fourth day (year? decade?) of the ceremony the tribe dug a hole, shaping the edges to fit the rectangular form of the block of blue glass the big guy had dragged back from Argelium.

Matt stared into the huge block of transparent blue–glass. Somewhere in there, among the strangely Mediterranean reflections, he thought he saw movement: glass cogwheels; the clock–springs of eternity, clicking and turning in their celestial orbits; ratcheting endlessly, one transparent tooth after another, another, another. Matt stared into the depths for a moment, lost in thought, then took took off one shoe, pulled out the non–slip lace, and used it to measure the object. 'One by four by nine,' he muttered, then chuckled.

Suddenly aware of eyes on his back, Matt turned.

What seemed like the entire tribe was staring at him, an acreage of eyes roughly the size of a NASA launchpad.

Shoe in one hand, lace dangling from the other, Matt stared right back.

'Shit, man, *you* try walking in them.'

He pulled on the shoe and retied the lace which had fundamentally rewired his understanding of the universe, assigning the Moroccan chick's impatient glance, the big guy's puzzled rumble and the death–star intense curiosity of the tribe precisely equal regard – which is to say, none at all.

'Good to go, man. Let's get this moveable feast on the road.'

On the fifth day (century? eon?) the tribal elders lifted the glass block and seated it into the hole, packed the father dune in tight around it, and lit a circle of fires over which they hung braziers full of smoking spice.

Matt breathed in the fumes, and stared at the block, seeing a menhir, a *stone*

*circle*, a *ring of blue (cheese it was pagan) cities encircling the planet.* Echoes of blue glass, ripples in a quantum pond.

There were more songs and fighting.

*Lots* more songs and fighting.

On the sixth (seventh? eighth?) day the big guy was officially given his name. *Rhe Carhodion.* From that day forward no–one would call him *jeju.* When the spice flowed in honour of the big guy, Matt found no reason not to be among his most enthusiastic wellwishers, and if his face ran with tears and his heart slopped over with good wishes for his mighty green buddy, Matt was happy to chalk that up to the spice.

On the seventh (eightieth? nine-hundredth?) day Rhe Carhodion sponsored Matt's inauguration into the tribe as a glassdreamer.

**'This White Man dreamed my name before it was earned. This White Man, Matthew Hansen, is the first White glassdreamer known to the Green.'**

Matt shuffled uncomfortably. 'It's just Matt, nobwit,' he mumbled self–consciously.

Without missing a beat, the big guy rumbled an amendment his former statement.

**'This White Man, Mattnobwit, is the first White glassdreamer known to the Green. Our first father is his, and his ours. Between father dune and mother sun.'**

Matt sighed. He felt a light touch on his arm and glanced sideways at Erimem.

'Some days it does not pay to be king,' she told him in a whisper.

Through all this, somewhere in the back of Matt's mind, a thought circulated, barely perceptible but always present. Like a shark circling its prey, Matt thought, then chuckled at how clichéd the thought was. *A shark circling its prey.* A goldfish swimming mindlessly in an endless loop around its teeny–tiny bowl, more like.

*Who are you, who are you, who are you, who am I?*

But the thought wouldn't go away. On the contrary, it seemed to come ever nearer.

*Get ready,* the thought told Matt in Erimem's voice. *Something's coming. Something bad.*

And the studious effort Matt made to avoid it by chugging back ever larger handfuls of blue spice only served to increase the sensation of sickness inflating inside him like a black balloon.

And then, on the last (first?) day, the bad thing finally arrived, and Matt's feeling of stoned wellbeing turned to horror.

Matt found himself standing before the glass menhir, trying desperately to think of neolithic civilisations, or a girl smoking up a joint on a kid's swing, or Ian Anderson's Stork–legged flute performance, or basically *anything at all* apart from the reality

carried forth from captivity and laid before him.

The *Arsenium* killer.

Bound and drugged to keep him alive and docile until the right moment, the proper moment. The moment when–

Matt reeled as the blue glass sword was pushed into his hands. The weight of it nearly toppled him over. No. Not the weight; he could lift it easily: the *balance.*

The words of the tribe were a storm in his head.

**'THE LIFE OF THE KILLER IS FORFEIT. IT IS YOURS TO TAKE MATTNOBWIT.'**

The black balloon in his brain and belly swelled until Matt felt he must scream.

**'THE FACE OF THE KILLER IS FORFEIT. IT IS YOURS TO TAKE MATTNOBWIT.'**

'Yeah, look, er...' Matt reeled. The face of the *(something familiar about it about the)* Arsenium *(something from before, from the garden, the loser pod something about it reminded him of the shiny's)* killer swam before him. The black balloon was *(familiar)* close to bursting. And what sick *(I know that)* infection would splatter forth when it did? 'It's just Matt, yeah? Like, *Matt,* as in...' he sighed. 'Never mind. But if you think I'm gonna slice this assholium... I mean ass... this *asshole* open with a bloody great blue glass *sword,* man, then I'm afraid, as my dear old dad was wont to say before he finally flew the family coop forever, *you've got another think coming.* You read me? Loud and clear, I hope, cos I'm out, man. Out like a lap–rocket narcissist on damp–squib day–'

Matt wanted very badly to throw down the sword. A grand *screw-you* to the forces occupying his head. But when he opened his fist, he realised he was no longer holding the sword.

*Well that was super–*

*–odd and no–*

'–mistake. Do you hear me, Matthew?' *Her* voice. Right there at his shoulder. 'A tactical error and grave mistake. If you leave the ceremony now you will insult the *Thalu*. Allies are required to save Andy and Ibrahim.'

Ibrahim? *Ibrahim?* That was it! The *Arsenium* assassin standing before them *was–*

*(Matt. Matt it's me. It's Professor Hadmani.)*

'… I... am... NOT... killing... any...' Matt heard his own voice as if from a very great distance.

*(You know me. I head up the history department at the museum where Andy and Erimem work. I'm here to help you.)*

Captain Fossil! From the shiny's loser pod!

Matt *(flatscreen in a wall big enough to put all time and space in wind harp in the garden Mallory on the playground swing do you want to do something stupid and of course he)* blinked.

'Ibrahim?' His voice shook weakly, a broken limb, long unused.

Erimem's voice was closer.

Louder.

'I will assume this burden.'

As Matt watched in shocked amazement, Erimem grasped the blade two–handed, lifted it from his own hands, and with no expression whatsoever on her face, brought it down on the bound killer, slicing him into two inequal sized chunks of bloody meat.

Matt stared at the insides of the *(fossil it was)* Arsenium killer *(CAPTAIN FOSSIL, what had she DONE it was)* soaking into *(her own friend, her relative, it was)* the desert.

He watched the father dune feed.

Somewhere in his head a voice thundered distantly. The big guy was soapboxing.

**'THE RED MAN MADE THE GREEN MEN AS THE BLUE MEN MADE THE RED!'**

A sound like an earthquake rattled Matts ears. The Thalu were *cheering.*

**'THE WHITE MEN, MATTNOBWIT GLASSDREAMER AND ERIMEMUSHINTEPEREM THE LOST PHARAOH, WHO COME TO US NOW FROM ARGELIUM THE CATHEDRAL OF GHOSTS, HAVE SHOWN US OUR DESTINY. THE DESTINY OF ALL MEN: TO KILL THEIR GODS!'**

*–shit the psycho bastard just–*

**'DEATH TO THE RED MEN! DEATH TO THE MEMORY OF THE BLUE MEN!'**

*–weaponized us holy–*

***'I, RHE CARHODION, GLASSDREAMER, WEARING THE FACE OF MY FATHER, RHE GATHATRIUM, TRIBAL LEADER, HAVE SPOKEN!***

The crowd roared.

The black balloon burst.

Time passed, and so did the glass–raising.

Matt stood alone, in deep contemplation, the blue glass sword still clenched in his fist, meat from the killer's body still sliding in greasy globs and gobbets down the shining translucent blade. More strings of meat decorated Matt himself. He stared at the *(arsenium he was ibrahim he was)* Green man he had killed. Half an accusing expression stared back. Half an expression from a face he knew.

A little more time passed; mother sun rolled on through the big sky.

Matt watched the father dune feed.

He blinked.

*But he hadn't killed–*

*Erimem. It was Erimem who–*

*(somewhen, somewhere, out in the blue)*

Matt frowned. He looked around. *Where was–*

Matt didn't finish the question because he already knew the answer. It sang in his head, a truth as intensely blue as glass or spice or blood. Erimem (the Pharaoh, the Lost Pharaoh, that was what they'd called her) was exactly where she'd been for the

last two months: buried in the father dune in a squarecave sealed by blocks of stone, a seal so heavy even a White Man could not push it aside.

A prisoner of the *Thalu,* the Green Men.

Of Rhe Gathatrium, the tribal leader.

Of Rhe Carhodion, glassdreamer.

The big guy.

His *friend.*

*Sacrifice? Hostage? Weapon?*

*Delirium vision?*

*Blue memory?*

Staring at the dead *(ibrahim it was)* Arsenium assassin, the dripping *(symbol it was a symbol, the ritual badge of office of a tribal)* sword in his own white–knuckled fist, Matt at last had his answer.

It wasn't just the Big Guy the *Thalu* had made a glassdreamer.

It was Matt too.

**From the Account of Andrea Hansen**
**VI**
**The Eve of the War**

The guest suite in the Red Palace at Ferrohelios was strange, beautiful, and even more gigantic than all other things architecturally Maahosian which Andy had so far experienced.

Gazing out across the view from the vantage point of a window seat on the order of size of a medieval seige engine, Andy felt closer to Gulliver attempting to flee the land of Brobdingnag while hiding in a giant girl's picnic basket than the oldest daughter in *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* at the point where *her* immediate priority had been saving *her* idiot bro from a bunch of overly–friendly giant ants. Which was a shame because the idea of a ride on a bumble bee through a summer garden was a flight of fancy so entirely preposterous it could not be cured even by long–term exposure to the nihilistic malady known as twenty–first century living. In point of fact the self–same image had been one of only a handful keeping her afloat in a world which had to date boot–saled her parents, her education, any hope of a signficant income, most of her patience, and (if evidence were to be believed) every single atom

of grey matter the idiot bro had been gifted with at birth; replacing these instead with a time travelling Pharaoh and some significantly mind–altering experiences throughout time and space on the order of regularly getting smashed on Vesper slammers.

Andy sighed. There were days (some of them weeks long, apparently) where life was such an unreasonably hideous game of *Shit–Twister*, that all you really wanted was to kick the festering mess under the nearest rug and run a country mile from your whole entire life.

*And how much did* that *sound like Matt-the-Mouth whining on again, remind me?*

For fear of a sudden unavoidable empathy with the idiot bro, Andy climbed down from the chair, gathered her breath and jogged across the mother–of–pearl textured floor, looping the pool–sized step–down bath twice just to get her heart rate up, taking a quick break for enough pull–ups on the bedrail to give her an endorphin rush and arriving finally back at the wide, triple–heart–shaped window from which she had spent the last several days gazing with the intense longing of any fairy–tale princess kept prisoner in an ivory tower.

Wasting less time than thought, Andy chinned herself onto the curved sill, drew up her legs and wrapped her arms around her knees. With arms around shins and chin upon knees, she considered her position. If coming to Ferrohelios had been a plan akin to their plan to infiltrate the Green Men, the *Amigos* had so far batted oh–for–two. And now here she was - as much a prisoner or prime exhibit in an alien menagerie as any hero of pulp SF – any of Burroughs' books, say, just to pull a random name from a hat.

Andy stared out of the window into the tentacular Palace gardens; where manta–like hummingbirds flitted from glassflowers to lizardfruit, where bees shaped like sunfish scattered pollen like scented rain as they drifted through the rose quartz sky, where trees reached for mother sun with anemone arms and urchin spines; a garden in a world where miracles came in family assortment packs and the impossible, as promised, took *just a little longer.*

Before he vamoosed, Andy's dad had kept tropical fish. He *said* they were aware of him, responded to him, seemed to like him. But all she saw was a bunch of pretty fish, and all they seemed to be interested in was *JumboKrill* fish food. Meanwhile, somewhere in her confused blue memories, there appeared an impression of sketching in a garden zoo with an entirely different *(John, his name was)* father; receiving detailed, impatient instruction upon the techniques of accurately rendering exotic animal physiognomy in mixed media; and receiving in equal detail and impatience his ire when the sketches inevitably fell short of his own museum–approved standard of excellence.

The second memory was not hers, of course. It was another's. Howard Carter's. A horse–and–buggy ramble down a Norfolk memory lane as wistfully raw as any perambulation of her own – but nonetheless *not* her own – and it presaged a visit from the man himself.

Andy did not look up as the door to the guest suite opened and closed. 'Your dad would have loved it here.' She wondered how Carter would respond at her lingering

on matters paternal. Maybe he'd think it spoke more of her issues than his. Perhaps it even did.

'My father was...' There came a long sigh. '... a complicated man.' Carter moved to the far end of the window, sharing the garden–menagerie view. 'All this... it's why I sketch. It's why Edgar still writes. One day all these miracles will be known. Until then...'

Andy watched the garden for a while, thinking about her father and a certain train.

'So both our dads are AWOL then – in different ways.' Andy let her gaze traverse the six metres or so that lay between them. 'And, as mine told me the first night I stayed out past midnight: it's time to ditch the intrigue and spill the beans.' Andy let her voice grow hard. 'Just what kind of a rabbit hole have you guys red–pilled me into?'

Carter rubbed his chin, turning over her question. Andy watched him work through the issues. She knew they were complex. Why else would she not be dead?

'Fair notice: I swear on my mother's grave if you don't make like a tin of spilled beans this very instant I will have no choice but to sharpen my wit and cut off your nose to spite your face.'

Carter snorted, which of course was exactly what Andy had hoped for; her father could be as moody an S.O.B. as anyone's but mother had been a smart woman with a knack for defusing wit and Andy prided herself she was not a slow study on any day of the week ending in Y.

Carter was quiet for a long moment. Andy was getting a little edgy by the time he moved. When he did it was towards her, and fast. His expression was dark. This was not what she had expected. Carter stopped directly in front of her, close enough to touch had she been standing as he was on the floor.

'You still have it.'

It wasn't a question and she knew exactly what he meant.

She took out the Eye and held it up. It was blue, so blue it hurt, and the edges in its shape were the bleeding edges of reality. It was lightning made solid, that Eye. There was power in it. Power she didn't understand. Power even her blue memories could not yet illuminate.

'When they brought you in that–' Carter nodded at the Eye. '–was in your hand. Your fist. There was blood on it. Green blood and Red. And the memory of Yellow. It remembers the blood. That's what it does. It's not like the glass apple. The apple is knowledge. It *knows* – but that's all.' Carter waited a beat to let his words sink in. 'But this... this *remembers.* On Maahes memory is a weapon. A weapon even Tanta Sten cannot wield. A weapon even he cannot take from you while you live. Holding this you are more powerful than the Emperor of Ages. He fears you. But he will seek to use you. A White man. His own White man. He can propagandize you. Weaponize you. With you he can combat the threat of the Lost Pharaoh. That's what he believes.' Carter nodded slowly, and Andy got the impression he was almost talking to himself. 'Belief is a powerful weapon. The belief of kings is the most powerful weapon of all.'

Andy felt something cold and dark take hold, deep in her chest. A restless fear, a

bitterness. It *squeezed.*

She looked at Carter, held his gaze unflinchingly while she composed her thoughts. It wasn't easy but long exposure to the passive aggression of support caseworkers had stood her in good stead. 'I am not a weapon. I will not fight. Not for you. Not for any of you. Especially not for him. That's not who I am.' She took a breath, held it for a three–count, let it out. 'Fight Club, sure, I can do that. Some poop in a pub in a lockin with a belly full of beer composing thoughts with his dick, sure I can put a full stop on that sentance. Or I can run.'

She waited.

Carter said nothing.

'I'm no match for Erimem. Your Lost Pharaoh. She could kick my ass into the middle of next month in half a heartbeat. Besides. She's my friend and I won't fight her, under any circumstances. I'm not that kind of strong. Nor am I that kind of friend.'

Carter said, very softly, 'As to kinship I cannot speak. But on Maahes you are exactly as strong as you think you are.'

An image of the idiot bro rose in her mind, a hole in his chest she could poke a fist through.

Blue memories of his death.

*Burroughs'* memories.

'Then you need to hit your buddy the Emperor up for a favour. And I hope for all our sakes he's not too big of a jobsworth to comprehend the principle of negotiation.'

Carter listened as Andy explained what she wanted. When she finished he nodded thoughtfully, then turned away towards the door. A moment later she was alone in the room.

Alone with her fear and anger.

And with her memories.

Ferrohelios rose around her in glistening tentacular spirals, mother–of–pearl walls draped with lush gardens, balconied windows by the thousand peering in every direction. Andy looked up, shielding her eyes from the rose–tinted brilliance of a week–long morning. The quality of the light was different in the city than it had been in the desert. Just as intense but... less harsh, somehow, in a way she was more or less at a loss to define. At home the difference would have been due to air pollution, a million machines farting for England. Here... well, Andy was not sure there even *was* air pollution here. What there was in abundance, however, was people. Red Men were everywhere; bronzed, tall, effortlessly beautiful. Andy flashed on the cross–trainer currently stashed unused in the garage at home, and wondered if she'd ever live to use it again. In that moment she suffered a brief annoyance that despite weeks of exertion in nothing short of preposterous heat she did not appear to have shed a single pound. The annoyance was tempered only slightly by the thought that at least the desert had not (yet) succeeded in making her skin look like a dried–up prune.

'How many people live here,' she wondered at last, overwhelmed by the stupendous vision of alien conurbation. Her blue memories suggested a number – a

large number – but before she could voice it, a reply came from close by.

'How many people live in any city?' Carter's voice was equally soft. 'As many as can live there.'

'Hush!' Burroughs cut across them both sharply. 'The *nameless* do not speak.'

That much was true, at least for now. *Nameless*, dressed in servants' uniforms supplied by Burroughs' contacts in the city, skin stained copper–red... laden with baskets filled with fruit or laundry or otherwise obscure purchaseables... following as best they could in the wake of the Princess, a tall figure, hooded, anonymous, striding through the curving ramps and streets of the city as if she owned them. Well, Andy thought, Djora *did* own the city. Or would, anyway, if *The Three Amigos* had anything to say about it.

If the Emperor, didn't kill them all first.

Andy switched her gaze from her surroundings to her companions. Burroughs and Carter showed none of the sense of wonder she felt. Then again, why would they? This must all be old news to them. Five or six decades old, at least. Djora was a different story of course. She seemed even taller here, even more confident, fully at home in her own environment for the first time in... months? Years? As much as she admired Djora's confidence, Andy also hoped the Princess's royal bearing wouldn't betray them to idle observers. She'd heard Burroughs muttering irritably to the same effect under his breath. But it was too late to do anything about that *now*. The *nameless* never initiated conversation with the red men. Only responded.

Andy sighed inwardly. If she'd been in charge their group would have had a system of signals, unobtrusive but effective communication. It was a shame the *Amigos* had never attended Fight Club. She wondered what they would have made of her instructor's *negotiating* skills.

Lacking an answer (to this and many other questions) Andy followed Djora and Burroughs through the gleaming ramps and walkways of Ferrohelios. Carter, as ever, brought up the rear. Slowly and cautiously the group worked closer to the hub of the city. It was a long hike. Well – perhaps for Red Men with legs like stilt–walkers it wasn't quite so far – but for a five–foot–four ape–descendent of the sub–species *Homo barrista* who had, in evolutionary terms, only recently abandoned her nomadic proclivities, and who had just spent several weeks struggling through desert sands, it was a very long slog indeed. Their route took them in a spiral through side–levels paralleling the main thoroughfares towards the heart of the city and the Palace. As they moved deeper into the city, Andy saw that Burroughs and Carter were becoming more tense. Significant looks were exchanged often and more openly. Soon enough Andy realised why.

The main levels were filled with soldiers. Well, she assumed they were soldiers. They were dressed in uniforms – red and bronze – they moved in rank and file, never breaking step, completely silent except for the thud of their feet hitting the ground and the almost–musical clatter of their ceramic buckles and weapons. There were vehicles too; bulky, wheel–less, painted with desert camoflage; personnel or equipment carriers, she supposed. Some of the vehicles had what looked like weapons – twin ceramic and blue glass cannon – side–mounted on gimballed platforms. Andy began

to get a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach; the same feeling she'd experienced when watching newsreel of military parades dating all the way back to the cold war. Her feeling was confirmed by the reactions of the Red Men all around her, who diligently avoided the main thoroughfares as they went about their daily business. These were not people gaping in awe at a ceremonial display of pomp–and–circumstance. No, these were people who seemed to be processing what Andy had observed to be a straightforward historical truth: no government ever displayed an army it wasn't willing to use.

But what exactly *was* going on here? Her blue memories yielded an obvious answer, something Burroughs, Carter and the Princess already knew.

The Red Men were gearing up for war.

The same war *the Amigos* had come here to stop.

Had they known things were this advanced? Judging by the looks on their faces, and their huddled surreptitious whispers, Andy thought not. She bit her lip, briefly promising herself she would in future think twice – more than twice – about playing with Erimem's funky time–bling – if she was lucky enough to *have* a future.

Up ahead, Djora had slowed her pace. Now she stopped. As if issuing instructions to a servant, she beckoned Burroughs forward. Andy could feel his gaze raking over every shadow, every door and window, the entrance to every alley, every passing figure. She looked around. The level was very nearly empty. Where had the Red men gone? She frowned. A better question might be *why* had the Red men gone?

Beyond Djora and Burroughs the level passed under a series of wide mother–of–pearl archways before opening onto the main thoroughfare. Andy stared at the columns of marching soldiers and vehicles blocking their way. It didn't take much to figure out what Djora and Burroughs were whispering about. A new route forward? *Full–on retreat if they had any sense.* A moment later, their hurried conversation apparently over, Burroughs turned, casually set down his fully–loaded basket, and began to walk smartly back towards Andy's position. Behind him, Djora retreated slowly from the parade, hugging the shadows of one high spiralling pillar of the city. Andy shivered, unable to look away. Djora's body language had changed. She seemed apprehensive – not scared exactly – but definitely wary. What had she seen among the soldiers? Had someone recognised her?

The answer came in a harsh shout that echoed from the glistening walls all around.

Without warning Djora turned and ran. Her movements were so sudden the rush of air tore the hood back from her face. The challenge became a shout of recognition. Soldiers broke rank. A squad charged under the arches, racing towards them with alarming speed.

At the shout Burroughs spared a brief glance back before breaking into a run. Djora ran too, overtaking him in three strides, scooping him up and doubling her speed.

**'WE ARE BETRAYED! RUN! *NOW!'***

Andy needed no further urging but even as she turned Carter grabbed her arm and yanked her up a curved ramp into the mouth of a narrow side–level. Then Djora

leaped onto the ramp, overtaking them easily, snagging both in her free hand before pounding along the ramp at dizzying speed.

Behind them, soldiers charged up the ramp and opened fire.

Blue lightning burst around her

*garden of memory.*

*She'd walked here before.*

*A dark city under black falls, peopled by shadows, infected by light.*

*Past. Present. Future. Any number of different sideways.*

*Undifferentiated cells, growing wild.*

*Entangled.*

*And flowers.*

*Black blooms, communicating by scent, by pollen.*

*Slow thoughts drifting. Need. Intention. Desperation.*

*A root network, knitting soils and surfaces, foundation for life, the future; seeded, nurtured, carefully tended... then lost. Now wild. The wildwoods, velvet black. A place of fear, and loss. A place where only memory lived, hunger in a world without sustenance.*

*Black flowers, a jungle of memory.*

*Black flowers and blue*

fire raked her face, singed her hair. Somewhere, someone screamed.

The world spun madly.

Andy had never been more thankful for Fight Club training than the moment Djora threw her over a high curved wall and beyond the immediate reach of the soldiers' crackling blue gunfire.

She thudded into a roof on the other side of the wall with her stomach still in her mouth, her legs collapsed and she rolled. The roof was no practice mat – a red–bronze grassy material, in fact – but it was shaped in a curved bevel shallow enough for Andy to bleed off some of her momentum before finally succumbing to gravity. Rolling from the roof she crashed into tall foliage – springy red–bronze boughs – and from there it was little more than a spiky downhill tumble to the ground.

She lay dazed for a moment, then gathered her wits and scrambled to her feet. She looked around for Burroughs and Carter. They were nowhere in sight. But from the other side of the wall came shouts and the sound of gunfire, splashes of blue fire. Finally Djora's voice raised in a bellow which Andy had little doubt could be heard for more than a country mile.

**'HEAR ME! I AM RUBIDJORA CALCANGANESE! PRINCESS OF MAAHES! INHERITOR OF THE ROYAL CODE OF STEN! IN THE NAME OF THE EMPEROR OF AGES ACCEPT MY AUTHORITY IF YOU WANT TO LIVE!'**

Andy smiled despite her predicament – it hurt one whole side of her face to do so – and after a few seconds the sound of fighting ceased. Sensible soldiers then. Her smile faded when she heard the sound of people scrambling up the other side of the

wall.

Soldiers – *climbing.*

After *her.*

Not *quite* so sensible then.

Turning away from the sounds of pursuit, Andy fled from the garden through the nearest arch, then through a long curving tunnel debouching into a maze of narrow, twisting streets. Some kind of market district, she thought, with high walls, curved windows displaying wares, and doorways opening onto the ramped streets; a space her blue memories told her should have been bustling with activity but which had now been swept clean by the military violence of which she herself had been one of the targets.

Andy dashed into the space, stopped, spun around. The sounds of pursuit were approaching rapidly. Where could she hide? There had to be somewhere. Some arch, or doorway... *something.*

The doors were closed. The windows were dark. There was foliage – ornamental plants and small trees – but none of it was dense enough to hide her. And there appeared to be nothing she could use as a weapon in her own defence. Not that she'd have a hope in hell of taking on even a single Red soldier. The shortest of them were nearly twice her height.

Andy cast about frantically. The streets of the market district were a maze – could she lose herself in it? Maybe. But she had to decide *now.* The sounds of pounding boots were getting very loud very fast.

Aware that running in panic was never the best tactic, Andy nonetheless turned and bolted through the second nearest archway, belting hell–for–leather down the narrow street. As the sound of footfalls entered the market behind her, she slowed her pace, making as little noise as possible but staying in motion, taking random turns at every junction, or every time she caught sight of a Red man who hadn't already vacated the public areas.

Slowly the thudding footfalls behind her receded into the maze of streets.

At the first ramp she came to, instinct drove her down a level. At the next she reversed direction, rising two. The nature of the streets changed. The walls drew farther apart the higher she climbed and Andy realised there would be a tactical advantage to staying high – the wider streets would give her more visibility. And indeed this was true, with ramps and arches in the spiralling mother–of–pearl walls revealing views of other levels and distantly rising branches and thoroughfares across the length and breadth of the city. Andy stopped for a moment, listening hard for signs of pursuit, hearing nothing.

Luck – essential benefactor of any successful tactic – seemed for once to have been on her side.

Andy looked around for a hidey hole, somewhere to catch her breath and take stock. There. That would do. That dark hollow behind a large tree bordering what seemed to be a public park. Making sure she was unobserved, Andy moved closer, scrunched down and crawled into the space. She wriggled around, settling when she was fully hidden but still able to get a good view out across the park and down into

the city. From this height it was more magnificent – more magical even – than she had supposed while traversing its underbelly. A wide, circular hub sporting seven huge mother–of–pearl arms twisting upwards into the pale rose sky. Whorls and spirals, high narrow arches, tunnels, windows, doors, scalloped ledges containing gardens and parks, the vegetation every shade of red, umber and bronze imaginable, with deep greens and warm creams sprinkled among the darker earth colours.

It really was a beautiful city, she thought.

*But that doesn't really help, does it?*

The thought brooked no argument. Burroughs had sneaked them into Ferrohelios using a series of underground contacts and with a specific end in mind – surreptitiously returning with the Princess to her brother, the Emperor Tanta Sten, with a plan to do their level best to convince him not to declare war against the Green Men. A plan that, if he agreed to it, would place him in immediate conflict with the senate. A plan that had been shot down the moment the Princess had been spotted; before that, even, with the knowledge that preparations for war had advanced far beyond the point that Burroughs' contacts had realised. Whoever was supplying his intel appeared to be signifcantly behind the curve – worse, may even have betrayed them to the Emperor. On the matter of the Emperor Carter was clear. For Tanta Sten, given the Green pirate attacks on Red resources; the hydroforges, the stormmines and the Red iron clippers, war was inevitable. Only subjugation of the Green tribes – followed by the Yellow Men and all the others – could ensure the Red Men's survival and begin to cement together a planet–wide peace. For Tanta Sten, unity did not come from negotiation. Unity came only from strength. It was an image that Andy, of necessity a dedicated student of the twenty–first century, saw only too often: a political ogre with lawful club in hand, assured in the knowledge that they and only they could save the world from lesser evils than himself.

Andy shuddered, her head filled suddenly with blue, floodtide memory, juice of the glass apple. Memories of London... of Norfolk and Arizona from more than a century before... of Ferrohelios half a century before... of the Red Men, the Green and Yellow... of a dead city under black falls... a black moon falling to tear a blue wound in a red world... red upon blue upon blue upon red...

Andy closed her eyes, wincing in pain, found no respite from the barrage of images. Her stomach clenched. Sickness rose in her throat. She gulped reflexively at warm spiced air. A soft breeze ran through the foliage around her, cooling her skin. She thrust her hands into her pockets. Her fingers found something hard and sharp there. She brought it out, looked at it.

Facetted crystal, aquamarine, clear as a Meditteranean sea on a summer day.

A blue eye.

*The Eye of Erimem.*

The *Amigos* named the Eye a weapon. But was it really any more than a chunk of bling of a size to shame a cricket ball? Andy stared into the lenticular blue glass. Her breathing calmed and the hammer of her heart against her ribs began to slow.

A weapon?

Really?

Well, she supposed she could throw the darn thing at someone. If her aim was on the money it would make a killer dent. She nearly smiled but something about the thought disturbed her. About defending herself with the crystal? Hurting someone with it? Killing?

No... about... *letting it go.*

Andy gripped the blue glass tightly. She gazed into its depths, an ice–blue abyss.

A myriad iterations of the world, and memory, gazed back.

*Garden of memory.*

*She'd walked here before.*

*A dark city under black falls, peopled by shadows, infected by light.*

*Past. Present. Future. Any number of different sideways.*

*Undifferentiated cells, growing wild.*

*Entangled.*

*Flowers.*

*Black blooms.*

*Communicating by scent, by pollen.*

*Slow thoughts drifting. Need. Intention. Desperation.*

*A root network, knitting soils and surfaces, foundation for life, the future; seeded, nurtured, carefully tended... then lost. Now wild. The wildwoods, velvet black. A place of fear, and loss. A place where only memory lived, hunger in a world without sustenance.*

*Black flowers, a jungle of living memory.*

*Black flowers and blue glass pollen.*

Andy ran the shadowed halls of the black city. In her past were Yellow Men, hunting. In a different past, there was light. A living world. City as garden. Love of blue. Hope of blue.

Andy looked past the shadows, the darkness.

And saw a wonderland.

Glass this wonderland, blue glass and time.

Blue its walls and deep its roots; walls of invention built on foundations of desire, of love, of all that was good in the world. The hope of men; Blue Men, invoked by Sorcerors; a hall of blue glass mirrors, distorting over time; running like water driven by currents unknown; the undertow of destiny's tide.

Blue the city, and time; and history its long dance.

Andy danced too, as a child might dance; red in the blue; feet and hands and head all in the wrong; estranged without time.

She danced; and time, her ballroom, coalesced around her.

*First there were blue men, then there were red,*

*Then there were green men; yellow instead,*

*All of the colours, none of them white,*

*All of the blue men, gone to the night,*
*Only the flowers, alone in the black,*
*Only the flowers to bring them all back,*
*Only the pollen, the blue glass seeds,*
*But all of the flowers are gone now to weeds.*
*So somewhen, somewhere, out in the blue,*
*Green men are dancing, and Red men too.*

*The Sorceror's Lament*

A child's rhyme on a world without children.

The words of mother sun and father dune, alone in the glass, in the blue memory, the mirror of what was, what should have been, what would be again.

History: predator of time; victim of memory.

Andy danced and, dancing, remembered.

As the black flowers remembered.

Remembered the Lost Pharaoh.

Remembered *Erimem.*

*And somewhen, somewhere, out in the blue, Green Men were dancing, and Red Men too; willow tall, impossibly beautiful; a delirious bacchanalia.*

*Andy danced too, as a child might dance; funny, broken islands of movement in a flowing sea of elegance. Djora led the Red Men of the Royal Court, moving with tidal beauty, eternal, unstoppable. Andy gazed up into the face of the Princess; felt as strangely and brazenly empowered as she had upon her first intimate, terrifying brush with art–house cinema.*

*The dance, a rubicund tableau, washed over and through her: red–bronze–copper depths luxuriantly warm, scented of spice and earth; all the fevered darkness of life, the pincushion brilliance of what must inevitably follow.*

*The Princess leaned in close; scented breath, intoxicating; skinjewels glinting azure cold with every musclemove; a fever of rare–earth colours. Andy breathed the face in; sunset undertow, lost in violet, gold–flecked eyes; felt the rippling scent of them wash out from her lungs, a floodtide drowning every cell; challenging her to surrender, drowning her*

in hot, scented air, strange pollen.

She choked awake, gasping, lungs burning.

Her fists clenched. Blue glass drew blood from her palm.

Andy clawed free of the *(memory it was a memory a blue memory of things to)* dream, fully awake now, struggling to focus. Had she really been asleep? Asleep and dreaming?

Her dream or someone else's?

Past or future?

She stared at her fist, forced her fingers to unclench. Blue glass and blood. She

struggled to control her breathing. This world was so *hot,* the most intense Morocco summers ever all rolled into one.

*Now listen up my dearest grey matter: just get me through this and I promise I will never do Fellini and Tequila slammers EVER again.*

Her breathing calmed and thoughts began to order themselves in her mind. As the thoughts gathered, fear began to build. In previous *(she would never think of them as innocuous as mere)* adventures *(ever again)* through Erimem's hall–of–mirrors looking–glass Andy had always been among friends. But Erimem was gone, Ibrahim and Matt too, scattered to who knew what disastrous fate. Evidence suggested that Ibrahim was dead; the bro looked to be heading the same way. With the Princess essentially under house arrest, Burroughs lost, maybe dead, and Carter spirited away to the Palace, there to submit evidence to the Senate on the numbers and dispensation of the Green tribes or be imprisoned himself, Andy was... she was...

*Mother sun and father dune!*

She was *alone.*

Alone on a freakshow world, smashed out of her tadpole mind on memories that weren't hers, crapping herself that she'd never again see the world of her birth, Matt-the-stoned-free, or last week's abandoned washing up ever again.

*OK. Stop this. Stop winding yourself up. This is a place. With people. It has rules. All places do. Rules, processes, structures. All you have to do is identify them, understand them, learn them. After that...*

Andy squeezed her eyes shut and sighed.

*... after that – just maybe – things will begin to look up.*

She closed her fingers over the Eye of Erimem, ice–blue and bloody, shoved it back into her pocket. She wiped her palm on her sleeve and opened her eyes, shifting position slightly to widen her view through the foliage. Whatever the Eye was, it had done something to her mind. Sowed the seeds of order among the blue chaos there. With luck and a place to hide, she might just be able to figure out a way to–

*Woah! What the–*

There was a face staring at her through the foliage.

The face was round and lumpy, the colour of a mouldy pumpkin, in a head the size of a Space Hopper, with a tongue like an anaconda lolling out of a too–wide, too–scary smile filled with sharp, stinky, blood–coloured teeth.

*Dogs. Of course they have* dogs. *Why wouldn't they? Because how much worse could things actually* get?

The *oolaghah* barked; Andy felt like a world–class street–fighter had just clapped her ears.

The face swung away, was replaced by an equally horrible rear view: ten oddly jointed legs and a stubby, cheerfully wagging, tail. The '*laghah* loped, barking madly, across the park. A moment later three soldiers pounded into view, weapons drawn, following the hound straight back towards the foliage in which Andy had hidden herself. She jerked upright – much too fast – toppled out of the foliage, lost her balance, staggered away from the soldiers. There were three hounds she saw now, all equally ugly, all with equally violent smiles. The soldiers were shouting – warning

her to stop she assumed – though she couldn't hear their words over the snarling *'laghahs.*

Andy pelted hell for leather for the far side of the park. Somewhere in the back of her mind was the thought that she might be able to avoid the soldiers by jumping over the edge and down a level, but still she knew she wouldn't be able to hide her scent from the hounds. Driven by panic, Andy didn't listen to the thoughts. Some instinct told her to reach into her pocket and grab the Eye. Burroughs and Carter had called it a weapon. Maybe she could use it as a–

The first *'laghah* reached her, travelling so fast she felt the air between them press against her back as the animal leaped. Or maybe that was its breath. She turned, arms coming up, the fist holding the Eye swinging in a completely unintentional roundhouse punch which, by nothing more than luck, connected with the leaping *'lagah's* face precisely between its eyes. She felt a thud, a bone–deep shock running up her arm. The vibration of it seemed to last a very long time. There was a shriek of pain, a receding howl. Andy gathered a momentary impression of the *'laghah* – which she now saw was about the size of a Shetland pony, if a Shetland pony had the body of a three metre long centipede – receding from her as if yanked away by an overstretched bungee cord.

Time seemed to collapse then.

The pain running up her arm reached her chest and she cried out from the force of it. Her surroundings – until then hidden by grainy black tunnel–vision – slipped back into focus... just in time for the other two animals to slam into her.

Jaws gaped. Bloody teeth stabbed at her arm and chest.

Andy shrieked.

Her voice, too, was drowned out by the hellish noise of the hounds.

At the same time the park seemed suddenly to be filled with running figures. Huge, green, multi–*(arms they all had too many)* limbed, carrying blue glass blades and long-barrelled pistols, the Green Men attacked the red soldiers, who defended themselves without hesitation.

Blue fire and shrapnel.

Screams and growls and thunderous impacts.

The *'laghah* which had clamped its jaws around her chest and arm released her abruptly – or rather it tried to. Andy was hooked up on its teeth. The beast shook its head, the tooth came free of her arm in a bloody shower and Andy was flung violently aside as the beast turned to defend its masters.

Andy flew through the air, landed among tall trees, smashed into the ground, tumbled wildly across spiced grass, at last fetching up against the lip of the low wall bordering the view of the city. She lay dazed for long seconds, seeing but not really grasping the ferocious melee taking place, barely twenty metres away. Red Men. Green Men. There was at least one *nameless* too: male, she thought; dressed as she was herself, but moving with such speed that she could only conclude she was not seeing right. There was a deep ringing sound vibrating through her head. Her ears itched deep inside her skull. Was that shouting? A cry for help? Where had all this blood come from?

She blinked. A stray thought flashed through her mind. The Red soldiers – they'd not even been looking for her. *They'd been looking for the Green Men.* They'd been looking for the Green Men, and she'd just *got in the way.* Or maybe the hounds had scented her and thought she was that other *nameless*. The one in the fight. Though why they would do that she had no–

Wait.

Yes she did.

She was on an *alien planet.*

Yes. The people here looked human – sort of. They had eyes. Or what looked like eyes. But Carter had already revealed they didn't sense light in the same visible spectrum as humans. Did they even sense light at all? What she hought of as eyes might be *any* kind of sense organs.

Her blue memories seemed to indicate the Red and Green Men could recognise each other by sight – but maybe that wasn't the case. How else could Djora have talked of infiltrating the Green Men? She would have been recognised in an instant in any tribe not her own. *Unless the people here did not see things the way Andy did.* The way *humans* did. If that was the case maybe some other sense was in play; another way of seeing, or interpreted as seeing by her human mind; something she could never experience or understand. Some other sense – senses? – not dependent on visible light. Something that was easier to conceal or disguise. All this talk of Red Men and Green Men and Blue Men and Yellow Men. Maybe this was a convenience her own mind imposed on the osmotic blue–glass memories flooding her mind. Some way of making sense of the otherwise senseless. Her mind learning new patterns, making new pathways.

Andy reeled under the onslaught of the sudden epiphany. She was right, she knew she was. Her blue memories confirmed it – in ways she could not understand, could never explain.

On the other side of the park there was a sudden shout. Andy pushed herself up on one elbow, craning her neck to look back, ignoring the pain flooding her shoulders, which had taken the brunt of her impact with the ground. She blinked. The scene in the park snapped into ultrasharp focus. The Red soldiers, the Green tribesmen. The *nameless*–

–except this was no *nameless*. Sure, it *looked* like a *nameless,* its body coloured as her own had been dyed. But it wasn't *nameless*. It was *human*. As human as she was.

*'Matt–'* Her voice was a shocked whisper. He didn't hear her over the din of fighting men – the crackle of blue fire, the thunderous barking of the hounds – but others did. Soldiers. Hounds.

Andy's vision became a dark and grainy tunnel. A piercing whine filled her ears. She realised the sound was her own voice, screaming her brother's name, when one of the Red soldiers turned to look directly at her. Blackness edged her vision. In another moment the hounds would find her as they'd already found Matt. Find her and finish her off. Or at the very least prevent what might be her only chance to save him–

Uttering a string of curses which would have made her father grin and her mother

sigh with despair, Andy hauled herself upright and rolled over the wall.

The city whirled around her.

Slo-mo tracking shot. Handheld. Grainy.

She fell for three levels, finally slamming into the ground on a ramp steeped in umber shadows, scattering the squad of Red soldiers hurrying to join the fight above, landing hard on mother–of–pearl pavement, which she felt give way with a bone–jarring *crack*.

Groaning, Andy staggered to her feet.

*Stop lollygagging and run, you brainless–*

Andy collapsed suddenly, drenched in blood, unable to take another step.

One of the soldiers picked her up, yanking her into the air by one arm. Unable to find the strength to scream, she found herself facing the Red Man; face to helmeted face; eye to beautiful, incurious eye.

*Matt–*

She struggled to speak. To beg. Anything.

Then, as darkness closed in around her, the Red soldier slung her over one bony shoulder and marched away from the

*time*
*passed.*

*She woke.*
*Images. Blurry.*
*Guest suite. Palace gardens.*
*Shark bites in her chest, her arm, replaced by scars.*

*Guest suite. Palace gardens. Howard Carter.*
*Bees like sunfish. Birds like lizards.*
*Pollen: paprika, cardamom.*
*Mother sun, father dune.*
*Ferrohelios.*

*Pearl anemone arms reaching up to the (black flowering) rose quartz sky.*
*Arms that reached, that found and held her, cradling her in velvet black as she*

fished her smartphone out of her pocket. She'd been using it sparingly since day one, snapping things of relevence, of greater than even normally spectacular beauty, occasionally recording her thoughts and feelings. Mostly she kept it switched off. There were no phone ports or wall chargers here. When the battery was flat, it was flat. When the drive was full, it was full.

Again, she was surprised she'd been allowed to keep it. The ask was, of course, could it be used as a weapon? The answer was no surprise. On a world with no electricity or internet, obviously not.

She played back the last couple of entries, recordings made in Burroughs

underground home, then started a new file.

'Carter thinks the Red Men respect the *nameless*. But how can one be respected if one is not even allowed a name?' She thought a moment and then added, 'I've asked him to ask the Emperor to intervene to save Matt. If he's even alive. I hope he is. If the soldiers hurt him I fully intend there shall come a day when Tanta Sten's ass is grass – and I will wield the mower of reprisal with epic severity.' She chuckled suddenly, her expression cold, no hint of humour. 'On that day, Maahes will come to fear my landscape gardening powers.'

She snapped a picture of the view from the window, named the image INTERVIEW DAY, switched off the phone and shoved it back in her pocket. At least she had her own clothes back now. The *nameless* had retrieved them on someone's instruction. Carter's? It didn't matter. The apparition of jeans and shirt, freshly laundered (and bless someone for that), had already put her in a better frame of mind. For all the good it might do, she could at least run in jeans. Shame the red dye was not going to wear off any time soon, though. What the heck, if he wanted his own White Man to parade around, the Emperor would have to bring on the make–up girls. And agree to her terms, of course.

The door to the guest suite opened at precisely the appointed hour. Carter was there, flanked by four Red soldiers. She answered his raised eyebrow with a terse nod. Thirty minutes' swift march later she was deposited in what she took to be the Palace throne room, a staggering feat of architecture which put even her palatial guest quarters instantly to shame. It was all she could do not to waste the entire remaining thirteen percent battery power taking selfies.

She looked around the room. Red soldiers lined up along the curved walls, as motionless and perfectly presented as any wargamer's collection – except, well... *larger.* Between the court and the soldiers the throne room hosted finery fit to drain the full charge of any hundred smartphones.

At least that's what Andy thought until the Emperor arrived.

Tanta Sten swept in with Djora beside him, and the purely luminous instantly became dazzling.

Somewhere in the back of her mind *Timbuk Three* advised, *the future's so bright you gotta wear shades.* The advice was good but Andy wasn't listening. She was instead focused on her immediate surroundings. The Emperor was here. Carter was here. Djora was here. Where was Burroughs? Captured and imprisoned? Still at large? Was he a factor? Andy didn't know. And how about the idiot bro - where was he?

That didn't matter now. Here and now was where *her* shit was going down. Afterwards would be plenty soon enough to worry about the rest of it.

Father and scion took their positions on the thrones. Somewhere an orchestra played as they sat. It was all Andy could do not to flinch away and cover her ears. Tchaikovsky would have been impressed by the size of the cannonade, though it would temporarily have rendered him as deaf as Beethoven. After that it was twenty minutes or so before she could hear properly again. Just as well, really; it took that long for the Emperor to dismiss his court. By the time Andy's ears had stopped

ringing, the only people to remain in the throne room were Tanta Sten, Djora, Carter, herself, and a handful of Red soldiers. Andy was impressed. If Tanta Sten thought as fearfully of White Men as she had been led to believe, then he was brave indeed to stand in proximity to one with only a court adjudicator and a small ceremonial guard for security. However much a politician he might be, the Emperor was certainly no coward.

In respect of this she waited for him to speak first.

**'I was a soldier once.'**

She waited.

**'A soldier values nothing more highly than peace.'**

Andy waited. When it became apparent she was to be allowed a response, she said, 'There's always the truth.'

Tanta Sten smiled – a worryingly impenetrable smile, she thought.

**'Peace and truth. Mother sun and father dune. White Men are wise in the ways of the world.'** He glanced briefly at Carter, **'Many worlds.'** There was a long pause. **'This is why they are such glorious weapons.'**

'Glorious...' Andy chewed this over. '... and therefore *valuable.'*

Tanta Sten nodded thoughtfully. If he was surprised by her words, or considered them insolent, he did not show it.

Andy studied him closely, but she also reserved a sidelong glance for Djora and Carter, who exchanged a quick, unreadable look.

Something tickled the back of Andy's neck. Something glassy blue, distant, frightening.

If she played this right the bro would be safe, but she herself would be up to her chest in shit.

**'I have been told you wish to petition me for help.'**

*Well that's one way of putting it.*

**'If my help is given, will you offer yours in return? Offer it freely and without condition? Will you help me make peace on Maahes? Live or die for peace in our time?'**

'Peace is always better than war.'

**'And if war is necessary?'**

'Then it depends.' Andy felt Tanta Sten's gaze descend fully upon her, and staggered slightly under the weight. 'On the terms of any agreement we make.'

Tanta Sten considered. Andy waited.

**'Trust is always an issue between those who wield power.'**

*No problem there, mate.*

'With great power comes great... paranoia.'

Carter looked suddenly alarmed. Andy pretended not to notice.

**'I have been told you have asked safe passage for your brother. This is within my power to grant. For this to happen we must come to an accord. We must learn of each other. Trust each other. Do you agree?'**

Andy felt an all–too familiar fist clench in her chest. Black and cold. Somewhere at the limit of her peripheral vision Carter and Djora were tensing. Carter wore no

weapons... but Djora was as skin–bejewelled as ever. And Andy knew precisely how much damage any one of those explosive–packed jewels could wreak, if their glamourously violent wearer so chose.

Andy closed her eyes briefly, awash in blue memories.

Burroughs memories. Carters. Djora's.

Their plan... to replace the Emperor with a more moderate voice... trust Djora to overturn the Senate. Was that plan unfolding even now? To arrange their capture... her own acquiescence... Burroughs, perhaps imprisoned... proof that Carter was reliable, that the Emperor could still trust his old friend? Deliver his scion, safe; his enemy, alive; a White man, compliant; ally her with the Emperor, then *replace* him? Avert the war before it began? Even if it took an assassination to get the job done?

Andy had seen Carter and Djora in action. There was no way the Red soldiers could stand against them. She opened her eyes suddenly. Here. It would happen *here.* Here and now was where they would act. As soon as she agreed before court witnesses. By asking Carter to intercede and have the Emperor save Matt, she had played right into Burroughs' hands. All three of them had played her. Used her. Weaponised her. She *was* the plan.

A subtle strategy, improvised on a wing and a prayer. Erimem would have been impressed. But what could she do about it?

*On Maahes you're exactly as strong as you think you are.*

Maybe Carter himself had given her the answer. Or *an* answer, anyway. Certainly there was no hope of ever saving the bro if she didn't take a long climb up the ladder of power. Alright then. If trust was the currency, she would pay the price.

'I agree.'

**'Then you will allow me use of the Eye, and your powers as a–'**

'No,' Andy said firmly, ignoring the Emperor's astonished glare. 'There's a better way. You will not need weapons if your enemies are delivered to you, here and now.'

**'Explain!'**

By way of reply, she got out her smartphone, switched it on, and before anyone could figure out what it was or what she was doing, played back the entire recording she'd made of Burroughs, Carter and Djora discussing their plan to replace Tanta Sten as Emperor and end the war.

There was a moment of thunderstruck silence.

Tanta Sten turned to stare at Djora.

Shock. Astonishment. Hate.

**'I... am... BETRAYED!'**

Djora reached for a jewel.

Andy winced as a massively muscled fist reached her first.

Djora fell back in a splash of blood, slid fifty metres, fetched up completely motionless against the plinth of an opalescent sculpture. Andy could not tell if she was still breathing. She began to back away; slowly, carefully. Somewhere Carter was howling, his voice furiously enraged, *'You bloody fool! What have you done?'* His voice ended in a bellow of pain as the ceremonial guard descended upon him *en–masse.* Carter was a strong guy, strong and fast, but the Red soldiers had blue glass

swords and pistols. Andy heard shouts, screams, bellows of pain, the meaty *thud* of blows. The guards fell back in a wave, smashed aside, and Carter was heading for the throne room portico. His last words, spit back over one shoulder as he fled the palace, resonated through her mind.

*'You've condemned this world to war!'*

And if not she herself would have died, either serving the Emperor or as his sacrifice, or as *de facto* patsy for the Emperor's assassination. And if she *had* died? Well then Matt would have used Erimem's time–bling to travel back in time to save her. And there, in the past, he too would have been killed. Whatever happened to her now, he was safe. Because there was no way the Emperor would let her die. Not after such a demonstration of loyalty. Not knowing she alone wielded a weapon no–one could take from her *without severe repercussions.*

The most potent weapon in the history of Maahes.

The Eye of Erimem.

No way in *hell.*

The thought was still uppermost in Andy's mind when the Emperor reached down from on high, wrapped his long fingers completely around her neck and lifted her from the throne room floor.

She was eye to eye with him now, feet dangling like a child in its parent's grip, and as much as she was starved of oxygen, she still found him beautiful. The smell of his skin, an exotic perfume, tickled her nose – but did not make it past the knot of flesh closing her throat.

Her back creaked. Andy began to wonder if she had after all made a serious mistake. She lifted her hands to his arm, but her hands weren't big enough to get a grip on his fingers and try to pull them open. His gaze was boring into hers, blinding now. Why didn't he say something? He didn't need to, of course. Her fingers gripped hard, slipped, gripped again, the fingertips sinking into his muscle. Was that a flicker of pain she saw in his eyes? Or just the world flickering in and out of existance as her brain was starved of oxygen?

The answer to her questions came only as the flickering darkness expanded past the Emperor's eyes to his face, the throne room, the world, her life.

Andy had been confronted with death before, but never on such an intimate scale. It was too much to take in. Easier just to let go. To surrender to the shadows.

It was almost a comfort to do so.

Then the Emperor tore her jeans pocket right off. Andy felt cold dry air strike her skin, a lessening of weight there as something fell out. The Emperor caught it easily.

The Eye. He had the Eye.

He held it up, studied it for a long moment, his expression unchanged.

It was true then. She had made a mistake. Mum wouldn't have been so impressed.

Erimem either.

The world tipped, swayed. She was moving. Being carried as a child would carry a

*(time passed)*

toy or

*(wind there was sunlight and)*

wind in her ears, a long way off. Roaring. The Black Falls? No. *The Red Navy.* Its voice an endless detonation of sound. She was outside then. Outside the Palace. Suspended, flapping, ragged pennant in a gusting wind; White flag, but not of surrender.

The grip on her throat tightened. She was lifted higher. Ferrohelios lay before her, rising in whorls and tiers. Beyond the Palace, in ranks without number, gleaming red fliers. A thousand ships, armed and fuelled and poised for war.

Black petals unfurled at the edge of the world.

The Emperor raised his fist. The Eye of Erimem flashed intense blue in the red sunlight. Somehow it had acquired a setting, she thought stupidly. A setting and chain. Like a necklace. A necklace for a giant. For the Emperor.

**'THE EYE IS MINE! HERE TODAY I WILL HONOR MY PEOPLE BY ENDING THE LIFE OF A WHITE MAN! LET THE TRUTH BE SPOKEN! THE TRIBES OF MAAHES WILL FEAR TANTA STEN, EMPEROR OF AGES, LORD OF THE RED, MORE THAN THEY HAVE EVER FEARED THE LOST PHARAOH!'**

The Red Navy roared again. Its voice was the collision of worlds.

An honour guard loosed a salvo of violent blue flame into the pink sky.

Andy felt her eyes begin to swell. She tried to close them. Her tongue slid out from between her lips. Her vision swam – stupid cliché – and the Eye of Erimem was gone from the Emperor's fist. In its place was a bone dagger. Ceremonial. Bejeweled.

Somewhere a long way away her body convulsed. Or tried to.

The Emperor leaned in close, his breath warm and somehow comforting against her cheek.

**'I thank you for my war.'** The Emperor's voice was barely a whisper. Or maybe that was her dying. **'With your death you have helped bring peace to my world.'**

The Emperor turned his face to that world, a world Andy could no longer see, only hear.

**'FOR PEACE THIS DAY! FOR PEACE ON MAAHES! TO WAR!'**

The Red Navy roared.

**'TO WAR!'**

Engines hummed as fliers lifted in ranks into the sky.

***'TO WAR!'***

The Emperor drew her close, closer, closest. The jewelled dagger poised to strike. At his neck hung the Eye and red sunlight brightened every upturned face. Her strength draining, Andy reached for the Eye. Her fingertips brushed the cold blue glass, curled, made a fist around it.

*It wasn't too late. If she could only-*

***'TO WAR!'***

Andy barely felt the jewelled blade as the Emperor raised the dagger to her throat.

For a few short moments her blood was the warmest thing in the cold dry wind of Maahes.

**From the Account of Matthew Hansen**
**VI**
**Death Comes to Ferrohelios**

When the rainbow–coloured shit hit the fan, Matt tried to duck out from under but, as usual, screwed it up. Apparently being a glassdreamer with unexplored superhuman potential didn't compensate in the slightest for his long–perfected ability to be – in the now abundantly prescient words of the shiny – a complete and utter teenage nobwit.

*Your superpower,* the shiny sis had once told him, fully confirming his nascent suspicion, *is without a doubt the ability to be a complete and utter teenage nobwit. I say this with love, so* don't *laugh,* she added, failing to realise Matt's mind's eye was filled with an image of her as a balding, middle–aged school–teacher–type, pontificating from the dizzying heights of a Professor X style wheelchair.

In truth Matt barely remembered the teenage nobwit he'd been – was it only a few weeks or months ago – and was that in fact a bad thing? For while life on Maahes hadn't exactly been looking up, not really, at least it hadn't been the juicy slice of ass–gravy pie served up so recently by his defunct mum and runaway dad.

For a split–second Matt flashed on a boatload of trendy youtubers validating their social agendas with his parental history. Given Matt's own finely honed social agenda – that *everyone* was shit – the irony of this image gave rise to a chortlesome moment which Matt enjoyed for roughly two seconds before it was grotesquely wiped away by a blow from a Red soldier which sent him tumbling seven ways from Sunday across the landscaped terraces of the Ferrohelios park.

Matt, carooming suddenly off fists both Red and Green, found his mind filled with another image, this one both hysterical and surreal. A cute puppy, painted dull

red–bronze, being hurled violently into the middle distance by Dwayne *The Rock* Johnson. For some inexplicable reason, the Rock's skin was coloured bright

*blue his skin was*

*blue his*

*blue memories*

*swirling through his head*

*divinely powerful; vortex of past and future; mother sun and father dune; desert sky and desert sand; scrub and stone and*

the rock pressed hard against his back, giving up heat absorbed during the weeks–long Maahosian day to the night gathering slowly throughout his inauguration as a *Thalu* glassdreamer. Matt leaned back against the broad slab, feeling some of his tension drain away through the vast mass, earthing his fears against the alien world which had become his new home.

Matt considered the thought as he gazed up at the ghostly skies of evening: the slowly fading afterglow of day; the half dozen peek–a–boo stars shyly hugging the horizon; the ghost of mother sun laying herself to rest beyond the dark and jagged father dune. Exactly when had he come to think of this alien world as his home, Matt wondered. Was it the moment he finally admitted that he couldn't remember the colour of the cat he'd kicked into the canal – or had it been the day he'd realised he couldn't remember the name of the girl he'd met there? She was attractive, he knew that, or thought he did anyway, in a spiky kind of way, but could he remember what colour her hair was, or how long it had been, or what she had been wearing, or what her voice sounded like, or what they'd talked about? The answers to those questions and others were a glaring *negatory good buddy.* Another handful of stars joined those in the sky, and Matt wondered briefly how long it would be before memories of his family faded as thoroughly as those of the girl, and how he would feel when they did, and whether he would miss them. At that point would it even seem odd that he was thinking of Maahes as his *new* home and not just his *home*, full stop?

If Matt had expected an answer to his question, he was to be disappointed. At his back, the boulder sealing off the squarecave remained silent, as it had every day since his *(blade his own)* daily conversations *(had carved away Captain Fossil's life)* with Erimem had ceased. And the squarecave beyond which had once held her prisoner – was that silent too? Was there no occupant now but the corpse of the woman who believed she had once been an Egyptian Pharaoh? Who Matt now *knew* – thanks to his blue memories – had once been an Egyptian Pharaoh?

If Erimem was dead, then what part had he played in her death? How would he ever know?

How utterly cheesehenged would shiny sis inevitably be?

More questions. Zero answers.

*And so sails the good ship Same Shit Different Day.*

Matt sighed, dug his hands into the sand beside him, let the father dune trickle slowly through his fingers. He leaned back and glared up at the scarp towering above him. It rose endlessly into the gathering night, a smoothly eroded slab of black rock, with long sections missing, pitted everywhere by similarly eroded openings – squarecaves. Ancient dwelling places. Homes abandoned by their occupants half a million years before. Matt struggled to summon a blue memory of the city as it must once have appeared, found only disturbing images more reminiscent of deviantart fractal landscapes than any functioning city from his own world. If a city was a machine for living in, he mused, this one had long since ground to a halt, socio–political gears eroded beyond repair, inevitable victim of wind and time.

Father dune and mother sun destroying that to which they had once given life.

And so now here he was. One more ghost in the machine. Bound to this strangest of planes as thoroughly as any unwilling spirit. Would he ever escape this place? Ever find the shiny? Ever return to the agonising mundanity of his old life?

Unable to find an answer to the questions in either his own experience or his blue memories Matt voiced his query aloud, to no–one but the wind, and was utterly unsurprised when there was no answer from that quarter either.

Time trickled by as slowly and strangely as it ever did on Maahes.

Father dune endlessly receding; mother sun forever beyond his reach.

When the big guy ambled up, shaking the ground like a Panzer division in a Hollywood movie, Matt could only be grateful for the interruption.

'Hey good–looking.' Matt muttered as the shadow of his friend and brother–in–glass fell faintly across him. 'What–the–heck's cooking?'

The big guy lowered himself to the ground beside Matt. With due consideration he mainained a distance sufficient so that the wave of sand which followed crested only as high as Matt's knees.

**'Blue spice is the–heck–cooking. The Elders have summoned a glassdreaming. The *maahes* are being starved.'**

Matt sighed.

*The mind killers.*

*Blue lightning in a living bottle.*

The moment he'd been dreading for weeks had finally arrived.

**'It is time to feed the lightning. It is time to wear the face of your father.'**

The only problem with which, Matt thought bitterly, was that he no longer had a father – or *any* parental figure for that matter – whose *(skin was)* face he was happy to

wear

*(her skin was)*

wearing

*(outside why was her blood on the)*

moments before she fell over the edge of the park, Matt saw his sister.

The shiny was in the shit up to her sparkly eyeliner again (no surprise there); beset on all sides by military types and their hounds, the same Red soldiers trying to capture the big guy and his half dozen *Thalu* buddies. The shiny's skin was deep red – not blood, fortunately – or not *all* blood anyway. Her mouth was moving vigorously. He thought she must be shouting, maybe screaming, but he couldn't hear for sure because the half dozen blows he'd taken had left his head ringing like Notre Dame Cathedral bells on Quasimodo Sunday. He considered moving in her direction. At that exact moment she landed a blow on the *'laghah* currently grinding its teeth into her shoulder which launched the beast high into the air in a long arc terminating at Matt's feet in a furrow of chewed up lavender–coloured lawn.

Matt staggered back, gazing in wonder and horror at the hole in the animal's head where its face had been a moment before. The creature *grunted*. A long gush of nutmeg–scented slime filled with broken canines fell out of the hole. It twitched once and lay still. Matt blinked, shuddered, resisted the urge to throw up. He gathered his wits and resumed his movement towards the shiny – just in time to see her topple from the balustrade at the edge of the park, blood and slime flung in a high arc as she disappeared from view.

Matt sighed, gazing down at his shoes. *Some days.* As he ducked, the body of a Red soldier flew past overhead, missing him by centimetres. A second later the soldier's head followed in a diverging trajectory. Blue fire crackled and glass blades *whirred.* Somewhere nearby the big guy roared triumphantly.

*Good for you buddy. Don't let the inglourious basterds grind you down.*

Stooping low in the hope of avoiding detection Matt scrambled away from the violence now spilling from the park into the winding streets of Ferrohelios. He shook his head to clear it, winced as the world fell in and out of focus, finally located the nearest down–ramp and staggered towards it. Beyond punching the nearest Red soldier in the knee, there seemed little he could do to directly help the Green tribesmen repel their attackers. Maybe another way to help would show up if he stayed clear of the fighting long enough. Until then, if there was any hope of reaching the shiny and saving *her* ass, downwards–to–the–earth was his best and only road.

Still moving, Matt scraped muck – blood? innards? *'laghah* drool? – from his face, flung it away in a disgusting splatter, found his view of the world suddenly much improved.

Staring wildly around and seeing the ramp was clear of other pedestrians, Matt leaned against a wall, then slid into a sitting position, knees against his chest. He tried to calm his breathing and slow his heartbeat. The black vines growing around the edge of his vision slowly began to recede. The sounds of fighting became clearer as the pulse hammering in his ears slowed. Somewhere came the tattoo of running feet, moving in lockstep.

More soldiers.

*Lots* more soldiers.

Matt turned sideways and scrunched back into the shadow of one of the ornamental trees growing beside the balustrade. After a few seconds the footsteps faded a bit, and Matt realised thankfully the soldiers were not trying to find him.

Matt sighed. How had the shiny even got here? What was she *doing* here? Was it her fault the Reds had rumbled the infiltrators? From (extensive!) previous experience Matt knew he could ponder these questions for a week and a day with as much fruit to show for it as any GMO crop at the end of second year growth. *How, What and Why* weren't the questions here, Matt finally admitted. The question before the Court of Popular Opinion was *Where.*

Benching all but the singular enquiry, Matt leaned back against the red tree trunk, closed his eyes and reached out into the blue. Shiny sis was out there somewhere, he knew it, and not so far away she couldn't be reached – if he got a move on. But if he failed to bring her home alive the ghost of his mother would haunt him forever. And as for what dad would say when he finally came slinking back to find his only daughter pushing up daisies... well, that didn't bear thinking about either. Neither of these scenarios was acceptable, so Matt decided they weren't going to happen. And if that meant he had to drag shiny sis out of harm's way by the scruff of her delicately perfumed neck then so be it.

Matt marked time until the angle grinder carving into his chest finally ran out of juice, then opened his eyes, took a long breath, lurched to his feet, and started down the ramp.

*Hell if he wasn't going to grow a Ghandi after*

a day's march from the shield wall, in the aged heart of the dying city, lay the broken tower of the *Thalu* Elders.

It was here that Matt had petitioned the council to release Erimem from captivity. It was here he'd been treated with the respect and honour paid by tradition to all glassdreamers. And it was here he'd been fobbed off with the revolting glibness of any Earthly politician.

That the Elders had promised to consider his petition, consult the faces of their forbears and pronounce a decision regarding Erimem's release long after she would have died of thirst, gave Matt cause for only bitter laughter: if he'd hoped to discover a bounty of commonsense on an alien world he was sorely mistaken. Idiocy was self-evidently universal.

'You worthless pack of stale sherbert saucers,' Matt had told the Elders darkly, his long-held philosphy of life at last confirmed beyond all doubt. 'You're just as bad as anyone in charge back home.'

The Elders, nodding wisely, said nothing.

Matt had fled the council squarecave in disgust, reflecting bitterly how much more here than the tower was broken, and finding the knowledge so familiar, so desperately intimate, as to kick off the mother and father of all migraines.

Now, days later, with the headache still blooming like black flowers through his head, he was back, nominally at the instruction of the Elders, to dream for them with

RK. To be poisoned for their future. To have his consciousness laundered and mangled and hung out to dry by blue–glass lightning in a living bottle.

Matt had a healthy wariness of coincidence. Lightning begat life on earth, so they said, and demonstrated this by synthesizing the atmosphere of Titan in a bell jar before passing the obligatory 1.21 gigawatts of electricity through the goopy soup. The result? *Amino acids.* Not life *per–se* but certainly the precursor to life in all its glory, from the ancient amoeba to the everyday ass–cactus, of which the the entire universe appeared mostly to consist, in Matt's view. Here on Maahes, Matt knew, lighting also begat life. Blue fire, mother sun's ruin, striking the father dune, turning the sand to animate glass. The result?

Living fulgarite.

The *maahes.*

Matt cast his thoughts out into the blue, through time and space, to the nursery dunes migrating across the surface of Maahes, brother to sand, sister to sun; the nursery dunes following the storms, and the storms following the refineries, and the refineries following Maahes' two broken moons; circle of life, *hatuna matata baby*, forever and ever, *Amun Ra.*

*Maahes:* creatures of living glass, feeding with crass and insatiable greed off that element common to Red minds and Green, all the peoples of Maahes. And when the lightning faded, and the *maahes* finally splintered in death? Perfect crystals of blue glass. Mind–stones so rare as to be priceless beyond measure, for *maahes* were long–lived, thriving as long as there were minds to sustain them, shoaling deep in the father dune when there were none. Crystals like the one Matt had right now, burning a hole in his jeans.

The difference between Life on Earth and Life on Maahes, Matt concluded with complete and sudden comprehension, was that Life on Maahes moved directly from *lightning* to *ass–cactus*, without any of the intervening evolutionary steps.

Now Matt trudged spiral roads drenched in sand towards the heart of the city, dogging the big guy's seven–league strides, back to the broken tower. To the poison. The Elders. The mind–killers.

It was time to wear the face of his father.

But Matt had no intention of doing as he was told – not completely, anyway. Having once met the new boss, and finding that worthy indistinguishable from the old boss, Matt had no plans to get fooled again – now or ever. To that end he moved slowly – not a difficult task compared to the big guy – and out of respect for his peculiarly tiny buddy the big guy paused often to wait for Matt to catch up.

All the while Matt was thinking.

Gazing out into the blue.

Wrapping the present in the past and the future in the present.

Tradition had made Matt a glassdreamer. Tradition and coincidence. In many ways the *Thalu* themselves had been the lever that hoisted the tribe high upon their own petard. Yes, he was a glassdreamer, had survived the rituals – once, anyway – but that did not mean the Elders trusted him. Or even wanted him alive. Over the last few weeks Matt had developed the very strong feeling that they would in fact be

considerably more than happy to have him disappear – permanently. Did they fear his friendship – well, let's be honest and call it *association* – with Erimem; a relationship they mistakenly considered an alliance with the woman they called the Lost Pharaoh? If so they were wise. Until recently Matt had no aspirations beyond straightforward survival. The Elders changed all that when they press–ganged him for a starring role in the Maahosian version of *Gangs of New York*. Now they wanted to drag him center stage and aim a big shiny spotlight on him.

Make a trophy of him.

Unite the Green tribes with him.

The *Thalu* wanted to use him – and Erimem – as political leverage to secure their own position as permanent first tribe.

Matt didn't care about that, not really. Everyone here except the big guy was a waste of space, just like everyone back home, all out for themselves, faceless before the gaze of father dune and mother sun. But as much as he wanted to make like the rolling stone, something was keeping him in place and gathering moss. Not just the thought of Erimem tucked away in her prison squarecave – something more powerful but less precision–engineered. Something which Matt had made regular excusions into the blue to find but had not yet fully located.

No.

Right now, the thing tethering Matt to the *Thalu* was the idea that – if he played his cards right, anyway – he might soon be in a position to extract from the Green tribe a favour of the type classified as *'kin huge*. Big enough and bad enough and blue enough to fish even the shiny from the cow–soup in which she was currently wallowing.

Blue enough to get them home?

Maybe.

And if it wasn't... it would be a start.

So, yeah, he would take a stroll to the broken tower; punch a cone of blue lightning with the big guy; make like the *assholean elite* were the best thing since pre–sliced bananas.

When the poison was offered he would be ready.

But the *Thalu* Elders might not entirely relish the future his

*(worms there were)*

glassdreaming would

*(worms there were worms in)*

summon into

Matt's head and their names were *fear* and *loathing,* and both were red, and neither could he control. Instead they strove to control him, propelling him to run, as fast as he could, on any path but that along which he was already running. Matt's

heart raced and anger burned in his chest. He ignored the worms as well as he could, pursuing only the straight path, the blue path, the path which would carry him to his sister. His sister. Shiny sis. Helicopter Mum Number Two. How she'd cheesed him off over the years. The assumptions. The instructions. All the authoritarian fun and mind-games. The homework. The punishments. The overbearing everything. The arguments. The shouting. The tears. All these had taken the wreckage of his life and propelled it even further into the depths. Oh yes, if there was a truth out there it was this: Matt's life had been black and lifeless, a tunnel with no end.

Until Maahes.

Until the *blue.*

Now Matt saw the truth of it. Saw what an ass–cactus, what an *actual teenage nobwit* he himself had been, and for how many years. Saw himself through the eyes of his sister. Shiny sis, who loved him and hated him, who doggedly pursued her legal right to be boss of him. Who despaired of his ever understanding what they'd both lost, while sacrificing still more of her future in his name.

Love and hate.

Was there ever a more universal truth?

His own personal *duat.* The place he would be judged.

A blue glass mirror to reality, a devastating glimpse of that reflected within.

One chance – perhaps the last he would ever get – to set them both on a better path.

Mouth a thin line and stomach knotted, Matt *ran.*

Mother of pearl fantasmagoria, Ferrohelios uncoiled in torrents around him. Matt spared the capital city of the Red Men barely a glance. No doubt the shiny would have been impressed. And why not? All she was interested in these days was travel. Since meeting Erimem anyway. Matt felt a familiar anger rise, pushed it aside. No point to any of that now. Time enough for all that another day. *After* the shiny was safe. They could shout at each other 'til they were blue in the face and the big red chickens came home to roost *then.*

Matt moved as fast as he could, in more or less the direction that felt the most blue. He kept to the narrow lanes and side–ramps where there were places to duck into if he sensed unwanted scrutiny. His path was frustrating, in that he could not follow the blue directly; not and maintain the appearance of the *nameless* which was his disguise. Matt ducked into an archway, turning his face aside as a line of Red soldiers loped past. He spared a brief thought for his Green friends. Well, the big guy at least. He hoped they were QX, though he feared they were not. Then again they were all doing as the Elders told them – and, honestly, if they were dumb enough to buy into the establishment well then it was their own lookout. On the other hand his own choice was far simpler. Shiny sis was in more trouble – scratch that – more *danger.* If Maahes had taught him anything it was this: danger followed the White Men everywhere they went. And danger on Maahes was just as supersized, just as *cholesterol–rich–and–heart–attack-y*, as every other darn thing on the planet.

Matt thumped a wall as he rushed past, fists clenched in frustration. He flinched at the grinding *crunch* of stone cracking. If any of the Red Men had heard the sound

or seen the cracked impression his fist left in the frieze that decorated the wall he would have been in trouble. Matt hurried on, trying hard to keep his temper in check. In the blue, the shiny drew further away, lost in a spiral maze of ramps and streets that Matt could barely keep track of.

He was going to lose her.

He had to move faster, find a shortcut, something, anything. But what would he do when he caught up? What if the Red soldiers had her? Matt had a very strong feeling that was the case. And what would he do then?

Matt increased his pace, ignoring occasional puzzled looks from the Red Men. But the long, winding streets along which he ran diverged significantly from the blue path he was trying to follow. The city itself was carrying him further from his goal. The faster he ran, the further away she was. And Matt began to get a very strong sense of being watched. Eyes like gold–flecked amethysts at every window and doorway.

OK, OK, slow down, think. This was no good. The *nameless* did not behave this way. They were calm, their movements purposeful but not rushed. He was attracting too much attention. OK, slow down then, take the first corner, duck out of sight, just... walk slow, be calmer.

*Like, take a chill–pill Scoob. Then maybe they won't pay so much attention, and we can just walk–on–by, man, nothing to see here.*

Matt slowed, changed direction at the first down ramp, emerging from the arch at a more sedate speed.

His heart rate slowed a bit. Not much. A little. Enough bread to soak up the soupy flood of panic he was feeling, the sense of loss as the shiny drifted further away from him into the blue. He was losing her. A fist clenched in his chest. *Shit.* What would he ever do if–

Matt reeled suddenly, lost his balance, staggered against a wall.

He plunged into the blue, flailing blindly, finding nothing.

The blue path had come to an end.

The shiny was

a lifetime's march from the broken tower of the *Thalu* Elders stood the blue glass menhir the big guy had dragged back from Argelium, the City of Glass and Ghosts.

It stood now, tall in the dull light of Maahes twin moons. Reflections of silver sunlight lay tunnelled within. Velvet shadows clustered at its base. They looked like flowers. Huge black moon–flowers. Shapes moved in the darkness there. Matt knew what they were. So did the *Thalu* tribesmen gathered within the clearing, circles within circles, walls of silent flesh within walls of silent ruins. Only the wind spoke here. Words, Matt knew, would come later.

Wide shallow bowls of spice fumed at the six points of the compass.

Blue within blue, reality within reality, blade–sharp reflections bright as the silver moonlight.

Without waiting for permission or invitation, Matt and the big guy moved towards the block.

Just for a moment, a soft sigh tumbled around the crowd.

Expectation, anticipation.

Green in the blue.

Then blue lightning crackled around the base of the block. When the *maahes* came out of the shadows, maws gaping with blue flame, Matt clenched his jaw right along with his fists.

*Come on then you prize-winning bastards! Let's see what you've–*

Blue *(jewelled)* lightning *(dagger)* stabbed

*(into her)*

into his

*(throat and)*

head and

Matt watched, with horror quite beyond words, as the Emperor of Ages held up his sister, ran a finely curved bone blade across her throat and, as her blood spurted across his face, arms and chest, laid her tenderly, almost respectfully on the raised podium before the Red Legions, who before his disbelieving gaze raised a stupefying roar of approval.

Matt stared, unable to square the image of the living, breathing, stupefyingly annoying human being in his head with the lifeless hunk of meat on the ground at the Emeror's feet.

There was a long moment during which the world drifted away. He reached out with both hands, groping for stability, finding nothing. He backed up, stumbled, fell. Scrambled away on all fours deafened by shock and blinded by tears.

When he finally lurched upright, he was less then three metres from the podium. Towering above him, almost close enough to touch, Tanta Sten himself accepted the exaltation of the Red Navy, arms raised in self–adulation, for all the world like some blood–stained hallucination of Dwayne *The Rock* Johnson, the Scorpion sodding King himself, no longer painted blue, but deepest crimson.

It was insane. Hysterical. Matt tried to laugh but the sound got hooked up somewhere deep in his chest. By the time it finally jerked loose it was a scream of rage lost among the Red navy tumult, the massive salute his sister's blood had bought the Emperor of Ages.

Matt, lost in the blue, and in the endless shriek, barely noticed when his fists clenched hard enough for his nails to punch bloody crescents into

his

*(you)*

palms his

*(bloody crescents into his)*

Matt passed through his glassdream in much the same manner as a crack addict passing through cold turkey, alternately freezing and scalding, lathered in sweat and vomit, stinking worse than any festering wound. He crawled into a corner of the squarecave, curled up, and tried to think himself dead. Nothing he'd ever experienced had been as bad as this. Well, nothing since mum, anyway.

All he wanted to do was die.

No. That wasn't true.

All he wanted to do was crawl back into the blue.

*(SCREW YOU YOU )*

Matt spent a couple of *(days? weeks? lifetimes?)* gathering his strength, then reached for the flaked stone bowl of blue spice someone had left for him, grabbing a handful, tipping the bowl and spilling the rest, and holding it up to his face with wildly trembling abandon.

He took a long, shuddering breath.

The world went away.

*(DICKWEED YOU)*

The world went away and came back another three or four more times before it finally came back and stayed back – more or less.

Slowly Matt uncurled, unglued his eyes (he had to use his fingers for that), looked around.

He was in a squarecave, lying on a deep dune of pungent sand. Not pungent in a good way, FYI. With a tremendous effort Matt rolled on his side and then his stomach, pressed his hands and knees into the soggy mess and pushed himself up into a sitting position.

The effort made his chest burn and every muscle in his stomach and limbs cramp up *(dwayne the)* rock–hard.

Matt shrieked. The shriek emerged as a whispered moan. Ever the optimist, Matt took this as a win, and then threw up again while trying not to chortle. Everything that came out was blue. Everything left inside was blue, too. Blue in the red. Matt flashed on *le Inspector* endlessly painting his new house blue, while the Pink Panther followed on re–painting it pink. Round and round. Blue and red. Red and blue. World–without–

*urk*

Matt doubled up as blue lightning flashed through every limb.

*(MURDERED MY)*

When the blue fire finally burned itself out Matt found himself once again wrapped in sand – cinnamon rather than puke scented, so that was a bonus, at least. Without thinking, he sat up. Nothing hurt. The absence of pain was like a monster hit on the best doobie ever rolled. He breathed in cautiously. Nothing hurt. A little later, when nothing continued to hurt, he took a deeper breath. He stood up. Someone had scrubbed his clothes. They were heavily sand–worn but offered no hint of stink.

*Thank you merciful gods of Surf and Daz. Expect further sacrifices soonest.*

Matt staggered to the high, broken entrance to the squarecave, leaning hard into the dawn pouring in scarlet torrents between the broken towers of Ilium – no, Helium, no, wait, not Helium... *Yttrobium.*

The broken city of the *Thalu* was called *Yttrobium.*

*Ninety-Sixth Place of the Noble Dead.*

Somewhere nearby, lost in the torrents of morning to which his eyes were still adjusting, Matt was aware of movement. Green movement. Was any of it heading his way? Hard to tell. *Best back up some, y'all.* A helicopter mum was a helicopter mum, be she white, green or sky–blue–pink–with–polkadots.

Matt tried to duck back into the squarecave. The dawn swirled aound him, loaded down with blue memories. Red in the blue. Blue in the red. Matt couldn't tell if the blue was coming out of him or getting into him. Either way the right thing to do was not fight it. He'd wanted this. Wanted those blue memories to come clear. Many of them *were* clearer, a *lot* clearer, the more recent ones anyway. Frighteningly, horrifyingly clear.

Squinting, Matt felt his way back into the squarecave. The walls against his palms were rough and cool but not powdery. No mortar Matt knew had built these towers. No mortar but mind.

If mind had built them, what had torn them down? Father dune and mother sun? Time and destiny? All of the above? Matt leaned into the wall, the squarecave, the broken tower... seeing through its eyes... remembering its blue.

*She* had been here. Long ago. The endless power of father dune and mother sun compressed into moments. Seconds even. No city could withstand the power *she* brought. Black flowers had bloomed here once. Bloomed and died. Everyone here had died with them. Died or changed, or fled. Then the flowers themselves had died. Now all that remained was the ruin of a city, the ruin of a people. Blue begat red begat green, and all begat black. The Lost Pharaoh had come to this place, and death had travelled with her. Black flowers and white fear had remained. But that was half a million years ago. Now there was only fear. Fear of the nomad for the fixed. Fear of the Green for the Red.

*Is it not every child's destiny to destroy their–*

No. That wasn't it. That wasn't *blue* enough.

Or no- no. Maybe... just maybe it was *too* blue.

Something *they* might have said. The Blue Men.

***('–the Red Men are all mothers. The Green Men are their children–')***

The blue memory *(White but not his; his sister's, the shiny's; no, it was*

*something else, something she'd found in the blue, someone else's memory)* locked abruptly into Matt's head: spline and tumbler fully engaged, and a door was opening–

Then from out of the blue came the *Elders*, once impenetrable, now transparent as good old fashioned glass. Matt gaped at their audacity. He shouldn't have been surprised. But violence was always a surprise when it happened to you or someone you loved.

***('–the Red Men are all mothers. The Green Men are their children. Is it not every (mother's) child's destiny to destroy their (child) mothers?–')***

Matt staggered, leaning into the wall, the broken tower whole for only the second time in living memory. He closed his eyes, and the darkness of the squarecave turned from black to blue. In the blue shapes stirred. Green Men. Green in the Red. In Ferrohelios, City of the Iron Sun, of Tanta Sten, the Emperor of Ages, Mother to Green. In the blue the Red navy lifted into the air: a thousand ships, ten thousand; humming, cargoed with death. Green death.

Green and Red were conjoined then by blue glass. Blue glass and blue lightning.

*Death came to Ferrohelios.*

Somewhere far away Matt's shoulder thumped against the squarecave wall. Unable to stand in the blue or against it Matt slid down the wall until he was splayed out in a sitting position.

Blue filled him and with it the lightning.

Destroying the Emperor was only the first step.

Deflecting the Red Legions from war in the Green *was only the first step.*

In the blue Matt watched the *Thalu* Elders take the White Man they believed was the Lost Pharaoh, the singular entity driving every critical juncture of Maahosian history, the shiny's bestie, Erimem; and, despite every khopesh counterstroke, every lop-headed Green Man; at last ran blue glass blades across her throat and stomach, opening her body to the new world. As her insides were liberated so too were the Green Men. Black flowers would bloom in her, and consume her, and all that remained blue would be driven from the world.

A sign that Maahes would be forever Green, and finally at peace.

In the blue Matt watched the Emperor of Ages take the White Man he believed was brother to the Lost Pharaoh, Andy Hansen, his shiny sister; and, despite every blow, every scream; at last run a jewelled ceremonial dagger across her throat and stomach, opening her body to the new world. As her insides were liberated so too were the Red Men. Black flowers would bloom in her, and consume her, and all that remained blue would be driven from the world.

A sign that Maahes would be forever Red, and finally at peace.

*Life on Maahes.*

*Finally at peace.*

All it would cost, Matt somehow knew, was the life of every White Man on the whole

*'SCREW YOU YOU RED PRICK YOU MURDERED MY SISTER!'*

The Emperor of Ages looked down.

He noticed Matt.

He frowned, slowly.

Matt, his head roughly level with the Emperor's hip, threw a wild punch that collapsed the Emperor's right knee with a hideous *crack.*

A shocked silence filled the world.

Matt was completely unaware.

The Emperor fell, his surprise turning to fury. Matt reached up, grabbed the Red Man by the gemstone hanging at his neck, clenched his fist, dragged him down even faster than he was already falling. They slammed into the ground with an impact that very nearly laid Matt out cold.

A hole opened in the ranks of the Red Legions.

The Emperor's face loomed over him.

The Emperor's hands reached down towards him.

Matt saw none of this. Tunnel vision had reduced his world to gold–flecked violet eyes and sweet–smelling breath.

Recovering their wits, the nearest ranks of the Red Legions surged forward.

One of the Emperor's hands had somehow become wrapped around Matt's throat, the other was reaching for the massive jewel clenched in Matt's fist.

*'IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT?'* Matt screeched, winding back the arm holding the *(Eye it was the Eye of)* gemstone. *'IS IT? IS IT WHAT YOU WANT!? TAKE IT THEN!'*

Matt plunged the fingers of his open hand into the side of the Emperor's head, his thumb finding the eye socket. As the Emperor screeched in rage and pain Matt dug in for a good grip, smashed the fist holding the *(Eye of Erimem it was the)* gemstone into his face with every ounce of strength he could find, then wrenched his arms apart.

The Emperor's head unfolded with a sound like a watermelon splitting open.

Tanta Sten's reign ended there and then, with shocking finality, his body collapsing to the ground with a sickly thud. Released from his grip, Matt fell to his knees, hunched over the remains of the Emperor's face.

*'Screw YOU you red PRICK you murdered my SISTER!'*

Somewhere in the back of Matt's mind was the thought that he was surrounded by the Red Legions. The Emperor's Legions. He didn't give a flying shit. This prick had murdered the shiny. Screw him and screw the rest of them too. Matt plunged his hand into the Emperor's body, grabbed a handful of what he found there and threw it across the stunned faces of the assembled ranks.

'THIS IS WHAT YOU GET YOU BASTARD PRICKS!'

He brandished the Emperor's bloody *(Eye it was the)* gemstone in his fist, before the crowd.

Faces, moans, a collective sigh. Matt didn't give two shits.

The assembled ranks took a knee. Matt didn't give a shit about that either.

He stuffed the bloody *(gem no not a gem it was the)* Eye of Erimem into his

pocket.

Silence.

Somewhere off in the middle distance, Matt felt a terrible mask of pain and fury clamp tight around his face. The mask hurt so much it was hard to think. He pointed at the nearest Red Man, an officer of high rank to judge by his uniform.

*'Come. Here.'* Matt whispered.

The officer stood, approached stiffly, came to attention.

Matt glared at him with revulsion. 'Kneel down so I can look you in the eye.'

The Red Man obeyed.

'You see my sister?'

The Red Man glanced to one side.

'DO YOU SEE MY BLOODY SISTER!' Matt bawled into the Red man's face.

**'I see your sister.'**

'Can you bring her back?' Tears ran down Matt's face.

The Red Man said nothing. His face was completely impassive.

'This whole shitting planet is a bastard shithole. Your shitty blue glass and your shitty black flowers and *all the shit-tard rest of it.* Who knows what kind of Harry Potter shit you know? Surely you can bring her back? Surely you can do that? Can't you? *CAN'T YOU!?'*

The Red Man remained silent. As silent as the stunned legions ranked around them both. His eyes flickered to the remains of the Emperor, then back to Matt.

Matt made a disgusted noise. 'Then what use to me are you?'

His hands closed over the Red Man's face. The hands became fists.

The Red Man made no sound as Matt tore open his head. No vocal sound anyway.

He fell away – dull, wet *thud* – and Matt pulled focus on the silent ranks.

Sobbing openly, he pointed at the nearest soldier.

*'Come here.'*

The world turned blue for a while. Blue and red. It seemed a long way away. The things he was doing to them – that they were *letting* him do to them – seemed even further.

At some point Matt, swimming in red, slipped and fell. His head slammed into the ground and stars – yes *stars,* blue ones, exactly like in all the Saturday morning 'toons – bloomed and danced. Darkness crept into the edges of his vision. Animal from *The Muppet Show*, unaccountably dyed bright blue, was playing a drum solo on the inside of his ribs. Or was that his heart? Matt didn't care. Shiny sis was dead and that was on him. Now mum would haunt him and dad would hate him and happy endings were banished from the universe forever.

One of the three figures leaning over him spoke in a soft English accent. He sounded like Ralph Fiennes. 'So much for the plan, Edgar. That's two for two.'

The voice which replied sounded a lot like Troy *you–might–remember–me–from–such–films–as–Stop–the–Planet–of–the–Apes–I–Want–to–Get–Off* McClure. 'Right of Ascension applies. He's Emperor now. Look at them, Howard. They don't like it – but what choice do they have?'

'And the Senate?'

'What do you think? If this stands they'll have all the power they ever wanted. All the wars too. This fellow couldn't possibly take them on. Not without removing their faces anyway, and where would that leave the Reds?'

'Minus a ruler *and* a government. In other words: exactly where *she* wants them.'

Red and blue fog swam through Matt's vision. Somewhere inside his chest, Animal had chugged back a bucket of speed and grown two extra arms.

A sigh. 'This is *her* doing. Somehow she got to them. To both of them. And now we're in trouble.'

'Very serious trouble.'

A third voice, red in the blue, rumbled, **'I could kill him right here and now. Claim *Right of Ascension.* Blood for blood. Just as he did. The Senate would not dare dispute my claim. And I would possess the Eye.'**

'Makes sense to me, Eddie.' Ralph Fiennes said. 'Same plan – we just took the long way round.'

Troy McClure sighed. 'We're missing something. He wasn't like this when I knew him before.'

'You told me he died then.'

'I thought he died. Maybe I was wrong.'

'Anyway, that was sixty years ago. A lot can happen to a man in half a century.'

**'Any White Man killed here today will take power away from *her.'***

'Djora, you sound just like Tanta Sten. Could you really take the boy's life in cold blood?'

**'If it is for the greater good... I am prepared. And better it were now than later if we are to stop his war.'**

'Alright then, maybe that is the– wait, *what the hell is that?'*

Far away in the world beyond Matt's head, far away but moving closer, came a sound he could never have described. A sound as big as the world. All he knew was how it made him feel.

*Fear of Blue.*

Matt wanted to laugh. He managed a long asthmatic wheeze. The blood of an Emperor mixed with a boy's spit bubbled at his lips. Everything he had seen – war, death, cataclysm – all of it was going to come true.

Death *had* come to Ferrohelios.

'It's her,' he whispered.

Troy McClure leaned in close.

'She's here. The Lost Pharaoh. Erimem... mush... And when she sees what's happened to her bestie she's... going to kick your asses into the... middle of next... month. Red... Green... sky–blue... pink–with... polkadots. Won't make any... difference to... her.' Matt sighed, an ecstacy of blue. 'Don't have to be...

glassdreamer... to see... that.'

Troy *(Burroughs his name was Edgar Rice)* McClure stood bolt upright. A mask of fear settled on his face.

'You're a glassdreamer? A Green glassdreamer? A *White* glassdreamer?'

'Funny huh,' Matt managed a broken smile. 'And all the while... you canny bastards thought... you were the... ones in... charge.'

**'A White Glassdreamer? Abomination! Kill it! Kill it NOW!'**

Matt finally managed a wet laugh as the Princess retrieved her father's jewelled dagger from the ruin of his body. Shoving Ralph and Doug unceremoniously aside she leaned in close, moving fast, without hesitation, fear and fury cloaking her face.

***'–not suffer a–'***

'–not *her*. It's the *Greens*. Listen to them, Edgar! It must be every Green tribe in this bloody hemisphere. They tricked you. Used us both. We–'

***'–White to–'***

'–can't let them put a Green glassdreamer on the Red throne. He'll order the Legions to stand down. The Greens will sack the city! Civilisation on Maahes will come to a full stop and the bloody Pharaoh will have won everything she ever wanted to–'

***'–live!'***

Drums.

Drums in his chest. In the blue.

Close enough to feel, to *touch*, the Eye of Erimem drummed right along with them.

***'Attend the Voice of your Emperor! I am Rubidjora Calcanganese and I claim Right of Ascension!'***

The bone blade, slick with his sister's blood, plunged into Matt's chest.

***'The Green attack! Now rise in the Red! Defend the City! TO WAR! TO WAR!!'***

*at least I got the luh*
*luh*
*last luuhh*
*laugh on Animal I got*

the drums in Matt's chest

stopped, sighed, then scrunched down with his back to the huge boulder sealing the entrance to the prison squarecave, pondering the ruin of a city, the world, his life, wishing hopelessly for something as straightforward as a canal, and a cat to kick into it.

Weren't there supposed to be canals on Maahes? Or was that *Mars?* There were canals here, he knew. Frozen ones, hundreds of thousands of miles of them, a vast network stretching around the planet, buried deep in the chambered bedrock beneath the sand. Rivers of ice, slow blood of the father dune, bringing life to the dying cities and peoples of Maahes.

To Ferrohelios. To the Red Men.

To the Green tribes and Yellow.

To the Plant Men, and the Glass Orchards, and all the other inhabitants of the cosmodelic fantasmagoria upon whose strange and startling shores the tide of life had beached him.

One day all this would end. All would be death. Black flowers would bloom. The Lost Pharaoh would stake her claim to the red world she had made wholly blue for the first time since its birth.

*But what in the name of anydamnthing-at-all was any of it about, really?*

For the life of him Matt couldn't work it out.

Oh, the answers were there in his blue memories, sure enough. He already *knew* the answers – he just didn't have the context to *understand* them, to integrate them into his world view.

What use, he thought bitterly, were *twenty nine inches, 450 grams and 16PSI at sea level* if you didn't have $C=2\pi r$, a large field of grass, a planet with seas, and the only life form not a Government with more than twenty–two legs and no brain, to tell you what you actually *had* was an FA Regulation football?

Unable to find an answer to the question in his own experience or his blue memories Matt voiced his thoughts aloud.

'Dwelling on things that can't be changed is rarely productive.' Erimem's voice, even modulated by the cavernous length of narrow tunnel in the rock above his head from which it emerged, had the tone of one who has pronounced a definitive statement. 'I was taught that focusing on things one *can* change, invokes the most chance of success.'

Matt scowled. Only the sky noticed.

'One may also pray to the gods for reward, though I have noticed the gods of your world are less rewarding than might be hoped for.'

Matt, flashing suddenly on the content of the major streaming services, couldn't help but agree.

'And in many cases more costly to petition.'

Matt touched the smartphone stuffed in his pocket (no service, batteries close to flat); briefly flashed on the last conversation he'd had about who was footing the bill.

'Do you have any idea how much like shiny sis you sound?'

'These lessons were taught to me by those whose ancestors ruled a world.'

Matt frowned. 'Your gift for dissembling is alarmingly political,' he muttered darkly. 'No wonder you guys are besties.'

'My experience of beasts extends only to livestock and warhorses,' Erimem's reply tumbled from the depths of the rock. 'But I can tell you this: all rulers are politicians. Except for those that are corpses,' she added in a further thoughtful echo.

'And suddenly I like your world much better than mine.'

*Unhinged as they both assuredly are.*

A long moment wandered by.

'It's shit they locked you up,' Matt spoke softly into the hole in the rock, half turning his head to do so. The massive slab at his back, covering the entrance to the squarecave which the *Thalu* elders had made a prison, was movable only by several of the Green tribe working together. Strong as she was Erimem could never escape on her own. *I tried to get them to let you go, but–*

'They're scared of me.' Erimem's voice rumbled back out of the hole in the rock.

A fact, and Matt didn't need blue memories to tell him why. Erimem was a dangerous person to be caught on the wrong side of. And the wrong side of Erimem was precisely where the *Thalu* Elders thought the Green tribes – for that matter, the entire planetary population – currently were.

For some reason they thought Erimem was their Lost Pharaoh. They thought they'd caught lightning in a bottle. Caged a demon. Matt wondered how long it would be before they realised – to their regret – that they had.

'You're not wrong,' he murmurred, in a whisper barely audible above the dull hiss of wind moving restlessly through the dunes. 'Then again, he added more loudly, 'we're lucky they didn't go all Tupac on your ass. '

An indistinct grunt with puzzled overtones emerged from the rock.

'Yeah, Tupac, as in *killuminati city.'* Matt sighed. The back of his neck began to throb in time with an incipient headache. One person, that's all he needed. One person who could speak plain English. How hard could it be, actually? 'I *mean* – that they could have *killed* you.'

A dark chuckle emerged from the hole in the rock. 'They cannot kill me. They have been trying for as long as their tribal histories record.'

Matt turned over this nugget of wisdom. 'Yes but why,' he offered finally, 'I mean, their histories go back...' he hesitated, unsurprised to find numbers – numbers he could quantify at least – entirely insufficient to express the blue memories filling his head. 'Well, anyway, it's a bloody long way.'

'Thousands of years. Millions.' Her voice was dark. 'Time immemorial.'

'And here I thought it was a long way back up the road to breakfast time.' Matt realised he was grinding his teeth to ward off the creeping headache, made a serious effort to stop. 'Anyway, how can they even think you're the same person? That a *person* could even live that long?'

'They don't.' Her words rumbled from the hole with blunt finality.

'They don't think of you as a person at all,' Matt realised. 'They think of you as a god.'

'I *am* a god,' Erimem's voice was soft now. Soft yet somehow threatening. Wind

in the father dunes. 'I was born of gods to rule a world. I have adventured in space and time. I have journeyed beyond life to the *duat,* and been tested there, and returned with more knowledge than

# PROMOTIONAL VERSION

**THANKS FOR READING THIS FAR I HOPE YOU ENJOYED IT. IF YOU WANT TO SEE HOW TIHS BOOK ENDS, IT'S AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE IN PB & HB ON THE LULU.COM BOOKSTORE**
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**Excerpted from papers held by the estate of ERB (III)**

***A Note To The Reader***

*My own wishes notwithstanding, contractual obligation requires that the length of the manuscript you are reading is such that it must be published serially. Consequently my narrative, together with that of my good friends Ward Carter, Andrea and Matthew Hansen, Ibrahim Hadmani and the Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem will be continued in forthcoming volumes to be issued by the same publisher.*

*ERB*

*Letters from Tarzanea, Pub. 1950. (posthumously)*

First there were Sorcerors, black upon white,
Dancing alone without tempo in night,
Then from the dance came a glass and a dream,
Then from the glassdream a spectrum unseen,
Color unrealised in time or in mind,
Chroma divided for what they could find,
All that would ever exist lay within,
All of it waiting for time to begin,
But the Sorcerors, wanting only to dance,
Made men from the light to fill their expanse.
First there were blue men, then there were red,
Then there were green men; yellow instead,
All of the colours, none black or white,
All of the Sorcerors, gone to the night,
Only the flowers, blooming in black,
Only the flowers to bring them all back,
Pollen of memory, blue glass seeds,
All of the flowers, gone now to weeds.
So somewhen, somewhere, out in the blue,
Green men are dancing, and red men too.

*The Sorceror's Lament*
*Inscription Found on the Sarcophagus of the*
*Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem*
*Translation: M. Junius. Scarman, D.Lit., F.S.A.*
*(attrib.)*

**HERE ENDS**

# A PHARAOH OF MAAHES

**PART ONE OF**

# THE CHRONICLES OF MAAHES

**TO BE CONTINUED IN**

# GODDESS OF MAAHES

*Jim Mortimore (arr.)*
*February 2015 – October 2023*
*Bristol & Berrow, Somerset*

## GODDESS OF MARS

### Prologue
### THE ALTERNATIVE MAAHOSIANS

**From the Account of The Lost Pharaoh**
**The Mirror of Heaven (II)**

There were scholars who claimed that the history of Egypt was the history of the world. There were many of these scholars and their voices were loud – loudest of all, unsurprisingly, in the political and military circles which currently *defined* the world. At barely seventeen years old, Erimem held a different view. It was one of the reasons she was running for her life.

One of the *many* reasons.

Running with her were four figures: priests; robed, nameless. Hard faces with burning eyes, men she had never seen before tonight. This was one of the many things she was scared of. Born and raised the daughter of a Pharaoh, Erimem could confidently say that on any given day or night, she knew every face in the royal palace. But not *these* faces. Not *this* night.

The four priests had come to her chambers in the hour of darkness between moon-set and sunrise, and they would have woken her had she not already been awake. For how could anyone have slept following the events she had witnessed over the last weeks and months? Her father's murder. Her brothers' deaths. The attempted coup she had ended by burying a jewelled dagger in the belly of her foolish brother's pregnant Mitanni widow.

The betrayal she'd *thought* she'd ended.

Running now through the stone colonnades and lesser walkways of the Royal Palace at Thebes, fenced in on each side by urgent strangers, darting with only the barest rush of chill air in and out of star shadows cast between the richly decorated stone columns, Erimem was beginning to wonder if her assumption had not been entirely premature.

What better way to end a ruling dynasty than murder the only surviving family member of that dynasty? And what better way to accomplish this than to lure her from her chambers in the dead of night using the promise of escape from an imminent assassination attempt?

'The very first lesson life as a soldier teaches us is that any assumption, no matter how small, can cost us our life, the life of the man fighting next to us, the campaign, even the war itself! Therefore challenge all assumptions! Do this until it is second nature, and you may yet live to be as old and ugly as your

teacher and General!'

The speaker was a bull of a man, built like the side of a pyramid, and just about as immovable. He stood at one end of a training pit in full armour under a blazing noon sun, flanked by a double–rank of highly trained elite soldiers. Antranak had ranked a General since before Erimem was born. In the world of the Eighteenth Dynasty and the explosively political landscape of the Two Lands, this was an extraordinary length of time to conduct a military career, let alone one of such constant and distinguished violence. Antranak was as fine an example of the military machine as any history had yet produced. And yet he was not just a machine. No man who was just that could ever have survived so long. Antranak had been Erimem's tutor since she had been old enough to swing a weaving knife as though it were a dagger and take umbrage from her position as the only girl in a family of men. In the twelve short years since she had put away the weaving knife, he'd grown to be a friend and mentor as well. Antranak was the steady rock around which the turbulent political and social undercurrents of the sixteen year old Erimem's life ebbed and flowed. When he was away from Thebes life was that little bit more tedious. Between campaigns, when he was here at the Palace, well... life was that little bit more *painful.*

'Erimem!' Antranak strode towards her across the burning sand of the training arena. 'What was your mistake?'

Erimem crawled from the wreckage of the chariot, hauled herself to her feet and stood to attention, her face burning. She felt two dozen pairs of eyes on her, the elite of the Royal honour guard. Those Antranak trained personally to protect the Pharaoh in combat. She wanted to make a joke. They were all so *old,* nineteen or twenty at least, and with such serious *faces.* She resisted the urge. To jest in such circumstances was disrespectful. Knowing Antranak as she did, perhaps also suicidal.

'General. My mistake was to assume that my chariot had been checked by the quartermaster for sabotage prior to combat. In future I will not make this mistake.'

Antranak reached her, hand outstretched. Erimem moved to take it but Antranak strode past without glancing at her, to the head of the chariot, the shattered yoke. Here a jet black stallion was rising from the sand, snorting and stamping, shaking off splinters of wood and other scraps of wreckage. Antranak strode up to the animal as it rose, leaning his head against its sweating neck, whispering soothing nonsense under his breath until the horse settled. Only then did he turn to the even more shamefaced Erimem.

'There is a reason we honour our horses, Erimem. This animal can save your life. It can take a spear for you if you lose your shield, trample soldiers for you if you lose your sword. It can carry you from the field of battle if you are wounded so you may fight again. It is your most precious resource, your last weapon, your friend and saviour. But only if it lives, Erimem. Only if it *lives.'*

Antranak knocked the yoke harness latch with the heel of his hand. The last

of the wreckage fell away and the animal was freed. The stallion reared, snorting steam, armoured hooves slashing the sand, eager to move, to run, as eager as Erimem to test itself against all challengers.

'Fortunately Maahes Lion–Maned is used to enthusiastic beginners!'

The war–horse shook its head and snorted, as if with laughter.

Antranak snagged the torn harness and swung himself onto the stallion's back, leaping in full armour to do so. He wheeled the animal and thundered back to the stalls, passing Erimem close enough for her to be showered with stinging sand from its hooves, to feel the acid heat of the animal's sweat put her own merely human embarrassment to shame.

Erimem turned, jaws tight, eyes narrowed. Two dozen faces watched her. She did not see the respect in them. She saw only the humour – or imagined she saw it.

*'And don't forget your spear!'*

Which, of course, she had.

Erimem turned back to the wrecked chariot, thankful at least that she would not be the one to have to clean up the mess.

By the time she had trudged back to the stalls with her spear (the armoured point had snapped off and would need to be fixed to a new shaft) Antranak was waiting with a hand cart and shovels.

'And now we will clean up the mess we made. We will do it together. Because the teacher shares responsibility for every lesson with the student. Do you understand Erimem?'

Erimem nodded dumbly.

'You mistake is my mistake.'

Antranak's intractable motto for life. One of them, anyway.

'Good.' Antranak mashed one rock–hard palm against her shoulder. The friendly blow was hard enough to leave bruises. 'You will work in armour to remind you of the lesson.' His grin was as wide as that of any desert lion. 'And then we will eat, and we will drink. And we will not, I think, tell your mother of our work today, for fear of retribution no man or god or army raised by the Red Lands or the White could ever protect us from.'

'Yes, Antranak.'

'And we will most definitely not tell your father that you are now training with his elite honour guard, since I do believe the heart attack he would suffer would save all his enemies the bother of a great many very expensive wars!'

Erimem tried not to smile. She failed at that too. Antranak was a force of nature. His respect and love were a gift to her family. But even this would bring no comfort in the year to come. A year which would see her dynasty and almost her entire family fall to ruin. An end she would be powerless to stop, and only barely able to avenge.

Erimem slowed, felt hands at her back, pushing her forward. She scowled, ducked the arms outstretched to propel her onwards, stopped. Starlight caged

her eyes. The leading figures stopped running, turned and came back. Erimem bit her lip until she tasted blood, pressing back against the nearest column, trying to melt into the shadows there, to become part of the engravings, the story of a great battle, many deaths. The ancient tale left claw–marks in the skin of her shoulders.

The four figures approached.

Erimem's eyes closed to slits. She stared from one to the other. The faces of the priests were barred with shadow, masked with ritual tattoos. Their expressions were identical. Harsh, urgent, impatient. Cold, unfeeling. Predatory. Their eyes drank the dim starlight as if feeding upon it.

This did *not* feel right.

'I want to see General Antranak!'

'That is where we are taking you.' The voice was a harsh whisper caught by the wind, echoed from the stones, utterly without direction.

'Where are Nebet and Muyet?' Erimem had left her chambers with two attendants, trusted slaves whom she'd known since childhood. Either would lay down her life for Erimem, who loved them as intensely as any family. The had left the royal chambers with her but now the night had swallowed them, gulped them down like some black, faceless beast.

'They are safe. Do not fear for them.'

Erimem tensed to reply – then stopped. She *was* afraid. Deathly afraid. Afraid – and therefore ashamed. She flushed. Her face burned.

'You're taking me to Horemshep.'

It wasn't a question. It was a sudden oracular vision. Lord Horemshep, Leader of the Council of Priests. A man who for years – decades – had declared his objection to almost every decision her father had taken as Pharaoh. A man who'd debated unceasingly Pharaoh's every action, who never hesitated to raise his voice in opposition to the divine wisdom bequeathed upon those who ruled. Who else could the author of this murderous coup be but *him?*

But... no. It was impossible, unthinkable. Horemshep was abrasive, aggressive, unlikeable, true, but he had advised her father faithfully for Pharaohs whole reign, and under that wisdom, and her father's rule, Egypt had prospered.

But now this. These Priests- wait, but were they Priests? She had no guarantee of that. She had never seen their faces before. They could be anyone.

They could be assassins dressed as Priests.

Erimem clutched her arms to her chest, as if shivering with cold, wrapping her fists in her long sleeves.

The four tattooed faces, lost in shadow, regarded each other silently.

Erimem watched the faces and knew she was right. These men were here to kill her.

'This place is as good as any.'

The four priests moved closer. Starlight glinted on razor sharp blades.

Erimem felt the night grow cold in her chest. Would this be her last breath?

Would *this?*

The glittering blades were a hand-span from her body when a terrifying moan filled the space around them, a long, ululating wail that seemed to carry every scrap of fear and desperation and fury ever felt by slave or king alike. It rose, shivering, on a night wind that seemed all the colder for it, a dark, ceaseless pressure, scraping at the nerves, awful, terrifying.

The four men hesitated.

In that moment Erimem *moved,* her hands leaving her sleeves, uncoiling like snakes, whipping out and sideways, leaving identical black showers in their wake, the blades which had been sheathed within her sleeves buried in two gulping, finely inked throats.

The two closest figures jerked, spraying arterial blood, their blades slipping from their fingers as their hands rose involuntarily to stem the flow of blood from their throats.

Erimem scooped the priests' falling blades from the air, testing their balance even as she threw them at the two remaining men.

They were dead before falling to join their still–writhing companions.

Erimem, poised, motionless, her face and body lathered with blood, barely breathing, the world scraped raw, her flushed skin vibrating as if struck by lightning. Her eyes were wide, filled with death, the men dying at her feet on the stone pavement.

Her hands, empty, the fingers completely relaxed.

She looked down.

Starlight caged the figures; two still, two still dying. Lives totalling decades ended in seconds.

The terrifying wail began, finally, to fade.

A shadow moved in the deeper dark. Eyes flashed fire, distant stars.

Erimem bent to retrieve her blades, wiping them on the clothes of the dying priests, then sliding them back into her sleeves. The last man to die convulsed, blood–stained mouth gaping, head thrown back, eyes glazing even as they met those of the huge feral cat slinking into the starlight, the man's last sight not of the woman who'd killed him but an inverted vision of the cat lowering its head to lap at the puddle of his own still warm blood, as his stuttering heart pumped it out onto the cold stone pavement.

'Meet the General,' Erimem told the failed assassin softly, coldly, as he died.

Then she sat down against the stone pillar, with a freshly blood–stained century–old war at her back, and sobbed her fear into the night, while the pet she had named for the man who trained her fed delicately on the blood of the men she had killed.

She was found next morning by priests bearing Horemshep's sigil as the sun rose to lay dusty yellow spokes across the blood drenched tableau.

Leading the robed figures, Horemshep himself frowned with deep displeasure, though whether at the botched assassination or the apparently never–ending chores bestowed upon him by her royal family, Erimem was

never to know.

Horemshep gazed long and hard at the blood drenched girl huddled on the deeply stained pavement, turning over options in his mind. Then he sighed, lifted her to her feet, and led her back into the Palace. Destiny it seemed, ever capricious, had a need for this girl which superseded his own need to be rid of her.

A thousand yards away, in the lowest recesses of the sun–drenched colonnades, close to the edge of the market, two recent visitors to Erimem's world awaited her arrival. When neither she nor the messenger sent to fetch her arrived as planned, the strangers ventured briefly forth to investigate her absence. Finding only a gathering of feral cats lapping delicately at blood stained stonework, they turned sadly and left. In their minds the reason that history would never record the inauguration of a teenage Pharaoh they had come to know as a faultlessly brave and peerlessly compassionate leader, as well as a deeply loyal friend, had now been made tragically and horrifically clear.

The bitter caterwauling accompanying their departure was like the wailing of a thousand feral cats at war with the night, and the momentary blaze of lapis lazuli energy which closed the door on their world was colder by far than any distant star.

Their brief but startling departure was utterly lost among the revelry at the crowning of the new Pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt, a human woman now hailed as a god, whose life and influence would span half a million years and the indelible mythology of two worlds.

The Pharaoh Erimemushinteperem.

**BOOK ORDERING INFO - 2025**

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https://neilisthebestdalek.blogspot.com/2016/10/doctor-who-virgin-novels-20-blood-heat.html

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https://www.facebook.com/groups/1908597789294796

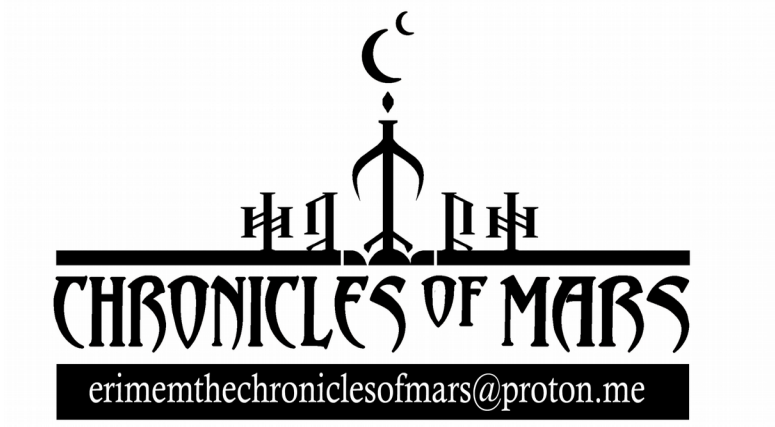
**My bandcamp page with music from Dr Who plays (and other groovy stuff) is here:**
http://jimmortimore.bandcamp.com/music

**GOODREAD reviews of Campaign are lined up here:**
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1015378.Campaign

**Free (slightly-redacted-for-swearing) reading copy of Campaign can be found here:**
http://doctorwho.org.nz/archive/campaign/

**I'd Like To Thank**

Iain for lending me his bodacious characters
Dee for lending me her definitively non-bogus fizzog
Jane for lending me her most triumphant art skills
And you lot out there for lending me yer lug'oles
Be cool to eact other - and party on dudes!
*Jimbo, Earth & Maahes, 2025*

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Gemma, Paula, Monica, Beth, Charley, Fran, Barbara
Lorna, Amanda, Jess, Jaycee; Lesley, Jay, Jay
Georgina, Alison, Tonia & anyone else I can't
remember due to age and idiocy
who bemoaned my awful fate or
elsewise gaffer taped the ants
hoovered up the fuzz
or mopped up the
rancid goo.
*Luvya*

*Normal Service Will Not Be Resumed*